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THE

WOMAN'S KINGDOM.

VOL. III.

THE WOMAN'S KINGDOM.

A Love Story.

76556

THE AUTHOR OF

'JOHN HALIFAX, GENTLEMAN,'

&c. &c.

'Queens you must always be: queens to your lovers; queens to your husbands and your sons; queens of higher mystery to the world beyond. . . . . But, alas! you are often too idle and careless queens, grasping at majesty in the least things, while you abdicate it in the greatest!'—

JOHN RUSKIN.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

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THE

WOMAN'S KINGDOM.

CHAPTER XXII.

HOLYWELL HALL, whatever it had originally been, was now transformed into one of those splendid modern mansions peculiar to England, and to the taste of English merchant princes; exclusively modern: for, like Mr. Vanderdecken, these commercial magnates have seldom known a grandfather; and most of them see the wisdom of escaping entirely from the sombre glory of unattainable ancestral dignity, into the tangible magnificence of present wealth.

Everything at Holywell was solely of to-day, except a wall or two left standing for picturesque-

ness, and the gigantic trees of the park, which could not well be re-grown, and made trim and new, or very likely Mr. Vanderdecken would have done it. In the house he did as he chose. The upholstery was of the latest style; the tables, chairs, mirrors, and pictures—all being equally regarded as furniture—had not one antique flaw. In fact, the whole contents of the mansion might have come—half of it did come—bran-new and specklessly perfect, from the Great Exhibition of All Nations, then just closed. It was altogether a very splendid abode, complete in all its arrangements, and lacking nothing that money—which can purchase taste, among other trifles—could supply.

The only thing it wanted—if, indeed, such a want is worth mentioning—was that intangible something which may be called the soul of a house, in contradistinction from its body; which makes you conscious of the presence and influence of somebody who loves the dwelling and takes pleasure in it, either for its own sake—we can get attached to dead bricks and mortar, for want

of anything better—or for the sake of some human being belonging to it. This soul, which can inhabit and inform with its own beauty and brightness a very poor abode, does not always dwell in a rich one, and certainly did not dwell at Holywell Hall.

Nevertheless, it was a fine place, and perfect of its kind: quite above criticism, indeed, except that a captious observer might say, if it had a fault, it was that, like its mistress, its handsomeness verged on too much of splendid solidity. You found in it none of the play of variety, the sweet little untidinesses—such as a book out of its place, a bit of work left in a chair, or a child's toy on the floor, which make a house look inhabited and home-like. From end to end you might traverse Holywell Hall and not discover aught amiss, not even in Mrs. Vanderdecken's boudoir, where she sat every morning—scarcely for business, domestic or otherwise: she had nothing to do; but merely because most ladies in the neighbourhood had such a room, and were always found sitting there before luncheon. They

also—as she found on coming home from abroad—had the good old English habit of needle-work, so Mrs. Vanderdecken likewise adopted it, and was generally seen with a beautiful embroidery frame before her, where she was making a fender-stool for a charity bazaar. At least, she put in a stitch or two when she felt inclined, and her own or Gertrude's maid continued and completed the task.

The effect of the elegant work, and the diamond-ringed fingers moving over it, was very good, while as for the room it was perfect, and arranged with an especial view to those rosy half-lights which set off to the best advantage a lady whose complexion may naturally be supposed beginning to fade a little. Very little in this case: and all that art could do to sustain waning nature was undoubtedly done for the wealthy Mrs. Vanderdecken.

Yet she looked dull, as she almost invariably did of a morning, for visitors rarely came so early, and she never saw Gertrude till lunch. The child was always up and at work by eight,

with her daily governess, while the mother never rose till after ten, leaving her husband and daughter to breakfast alone together, as they had done ever since the little girl was two years old.

Gertrude was an only child. Mrs. Vanderdecken would have liked a son best—a son and heir to all this property. Still, she was very fond of her little daughter. Women, who seem otherwise to have no heart to speak of, have very often the mother's heart—at least, that natural instinct which belongs equally to brutes and human beings, yet is a sacred instinct in its way. Mrs. Vanderdecken had it. She had petted Gertrude extremely during infancy, and now, as she was growing up into a companion, clung to her, as such silly women do cling to anybody who will take a little of the burden of existence off their shoulders.

I have called her a 'silly' woman; but perhaps that is not quite fair. There was no absolute silliness in her, no more than there was absolute badness; she looked merely negative,—

made up of negatives: the kind of woman who, if left alone, will wilfully do no harm to any one, but sleep through life like a Persian cat upon a velvet cushion—sleek, and a little uninteresting; but quite harmless,—or looking so, at least.

She herself seemed interested in nothing to any great degree. She had no favourite pursuits. Her sitting-room was in perfect order; the bookcase untouched; the piano unopened. She idled wearily over her embroidery, yawned two or three times, and pulled out her jewelled watch to see how the time went on—time, which to some gallops so fast, but which with her seemed perpetually to crawl. At last, unable to bear her weariness of it or of herself any longer, she rose and rung the bell.

'Tell Miss Vanderdecken to come up to me the minute she has finished lessons.'

But when, shortly after, the child came bounding in with an exuberance of life that made her almost pretty for the time being, the mother's only welcome was a fretful reproach.

'How rough you are, Gertrude! and how very long you have been at lessons! What detained you?'

'My history, mamma. I was in Queen Elizabeth's reign, and I wanted to finish it.'

'That is a trick you have;—when you begin a thing, you never rest till you have finished it. You are just like your aunt——'

Mrs. Vanderdecken stopped suddenly.

'Not like my aunt Anna, surely; though papa fancies it sometimes. But I hope not; for nurse says she was quite an elderly person,—and so fat. I would rather be like my other aunt—aunt Edna; isn't that her name?'

'Yes.'

'Didn't I bring you this morning a letter from my aunt Edna?—that is, I thought so; for the post-mark was Brook Street,' said the child, hesitatingly, as if treading on a forbidden subject.

'It was from your aunt Edna. She remembered my birthday, which nobody else has done for many a year.'

'Oh, mamma, why didn't you tell me your birthday? and I would have given you something pretty; and wished you "many happy returns." Isn't that what they say in England?'

'I don't know; I have almost forgotten.'

'Dear old mammy—darling mammy!' cried the child, fondling her. 'Now, won't you show me the letter from aunt Edna? I should so much like to see it. I wonder if she writes as nicely as she talks? Where is it? in your pocket? Do give it me.'

'Little girls should not expect to see their mamma's correspondence,' Mrs. Vanderdecken answered coldly; 'and you know so little of your aunt, that it is impossible her letter can interest you. She is well, and so are all the family. That is enough for you to know.'

Gertrude looked disappointed, but urged no more.

'And, by-the-bye, child, you need not say anything about the letter to your papa. He does not know the Stedmans, and they are in such a different sphere of life from ourselves, that

it is not likely we shall be very intimate with them. So the less we talk about them the better.'

'Very well, mamma.'

The child's answer was given with that careless acquiescence which neither implies assent nor obedience. Perhaps, unperceptive as she was, the mother had sense enough to discern this, for she said, after regarding her daughter uneasily,—

'You must really mind what I say to you, Gertrude. You are always taking fancies to people, and you are not old enough to choose acquaintances for yourself. Promise that you will make none without telling me. You ought to tell me everything. I mean your papa and me, of course.'

'But, mamma, you don't always tell papa everything.'

Mrs. Vanderdecken looked extremely annoyed, and her vexation took refuge in displeasure.

'You naughty, impertinent child, how dare you say such rude things to your mother—your

poor mother, who has no comfort in the world but you!'

Neither the anger nor the pathos seemed to affect the child very deeply; probably she was well used to both. She only stroked her mother's hand with a sort of patronising affection.

'Dear old darling, I didn't mean to vex you. I'll never do so no more—till the next time; and I'll be the goodest girl that ever was, if you will only let me go once again to see my aunt Edna.'

Mrs. Vanderdecken turned away very bitterly.

'You ungrateful girl, you don't care two pins for your mother now. It is all your aunt Edna.'

'No, it isn't; how could it be?' returned Gertrude, practically. 'Because my mother is my mother, and my aunt Edna I have only set eyes on twice, an hour each time, counting the hour last week when I met her at the Crystal Palace with cousin Julius.'

'Julius! is that their eldest boy's name?

Oh, yes; I remember now. You seem to have caught it up very readily.'

'Because I thought it such a funny name, and when we were walking together by the fountains, I asked him who they had called him after —was it Julius Cæsar? and he said no, it was after an uncle he had, who had been dead a great many years.'

'Yes; a great many years.'

There was something in Mrs. Vanderdecken's manner which struck the child—who was as quick to observe as her mother was slow—for she said at once,—

'Did you know him, mamma? What was he like? Was he my uncle also? Did you ever see him?'

No! the lady was just going to reply, but the contemptible lie—the lie of fear—died upon her lips. Falsehood was so difficult, so impossible, with her young daughter looking right in her face with the honest gaze of a child.

'Yes,' she said, 'I did know him once a little. But he was no relation of yours—only

Dr. Stedman's brother. He went out to India and died there.'

'How did he die?'

'He was drowned, I believe.'

'Where? in the sea?'

'In the river Hooghly, I think; but I never heard much about it. And now, my dear, you need not catechise me in this way, for I really can tell you nothing more. And you must not ask any more about—about Mr. Stedman.'

'Why not? Oh, I understand,' and the little maid's face suddenly became tender and grave. 'We ought to be careful in speaking about people who are dead. And perhaps they were very fond of him—his own relations I mean—and very sorry when he died.'

'Perhaps they were,' said Mrs. Vanderdecken.

She rose from her chair and stood, her full height, opposite the full-length mirror. Her lips were a shade paler than their usual rich colour, and she evinced a slight uneasiness and gravity of manner such as most people show in speaking of any unpleasant subject, a shocking accident, or

discreditable history, just enough to convince the quick-witted Gertrude that something mysterious lay behind, and make her resolve, poor little unconscientious girl as she was—alas! she had no example of conscientiousness—that in spite of her mother's prohibition she would question cousin Julius closely about his uncle the very next time she got a chance of seeing him.

'There is the bell, let us go down to luncheon,' said Mrs. Vanderdecken, with an air of relief, and taking her little daughter's hand with an appealing sort of fondness, which sat touchingly on the large splendid woman, she passed slowly down the marble staircase, crossed the hall, and entered the dining-room; where, in somewhat cheerless state, she, Gertrude, and the governess, were accustomed to take their mid-day meal together.

She was very silent throughout it; but then who could expect her to talk much to a mere governess? She never interfered in the teaching, but always showed the utmost distaste for, and ignorance of, the proceedings of the schoolroom. And whenever she addressed the little elderly lady

who taught Gertrude, and had been a teacher of children all her days, it was with a reserved dignity that showed plainly the difference between poor Miss Smith and Mrs. Vanderdecken, of Holywell Hall.

Yet she was not unkind, or uncivil, or unladylike: here, too, the extreme negativeness of her character prevented her from doing anything decidedly amiss, and no doubt Miss Smith would quite agree with Mrs. Fox, and with most other people, in finding no fault with, nay, even praising the great lady of the parish. It takes so little to gain popularity when one has an indefinite number of thousands a-year.

Meantime, Gertrude chattered incessantly to her mamma or her governess, with the wondrous merry heart of twelve years old, so that gradually the vexed look—it was only vexation, not sorrow—passed from the mother's face, and she listened with a lazy smile, glad to catch the present pleasure—and such an innocent pleasure too. If she ever looked really happy, this poor rich woman, whose life seemed so barren of everything but

riches, it was when in the company of her little girl.

'It is very odd,' said she, half to herself, when the governess had retired, and the child still went chattering on, 'but though, as papa says, you are like the Vanderdeckens, and not a bit like me, still there is about you sometimes a queer look of your aunt Edna.'

'Are you sorry for that, mamma?' for while Mrs. Vanderdecken spoke, she had slightly sighed.

'Sorry! what makes you fancy such a thing? Dear me, no; except that your aunt Edna isn't pretty—never was. Still, as I always tell you, good looks are of no importance. I'm sure I never got any benefit from mine!' (with another sigh). 'No, child: you are better as you are, and I daresay your aunt Edna would tell you the same thing.'

'Would she?' and Gertrude indulged, for a wonder, in a few moments of silent meditation. 'Please, mamma, when is aunt Edna coming here?'

'I really don't know.'

'Will she never come here?'

'How can I say? Your papa asks to his house whoever he pleases; and probably he doesn't want to ask my sister.'

'But don't you want her, mamma? Did you ever really tell papa you wanted her? Shall I tell him?'

'Oh, dear no; not upon any account,' said the lady hurriedly, caught, as she continually was, by her honest child, in the very ambush under which her weakness hid itself. 'The fact is, the Stedmans are so different from us that we do not care to invite them; nor do we think they would enjoy themselves if they came. But for all that, she is a good person, an exceedingly good sort of person—your aunt Edna.'

So saying, Mrs. Vanderdecken rose and ordered the carriage, while Gertrude, who hated being shut up in a close brougham, begged to be allowed to take a run in the Park with 'old nurse,' a coloured woman over whom she ruled supreme.

'Just as you like,' the mother said, peevishly; 'you are always glad to go out with anybody but me, and to do anything that I don't particularly want you to do. And what you can find to amuse you in the park, these dull, damp, winter afternoons, is more than I can see.'

'Oh, mamma, I can amuse myself anywhere, if only I am let alone.'

'Just like your aunt Edna,—as like her as two peas!' muttered Mrs. Vanderdecken. Then in her velvet, fur-trimmed cloak, with her filagree gold card-case in her hand, she stepped into her carriage, to pay the never-ending, still-beginning round of visits, which constituted the principal duty and solace of her life.

Her little daughter trotted off: trotted is just the word for the round, compact little figure, pattering resolutely upon its small dots of feet, the merry face shining under a round cap of chinchilla fur, the hands tucked inside her muff, and gathering close about her a scarlet cloak, like Little Red Riding Hood. She was not a pretty, nor even a picturesque child; but she was a child;

which is a great deal to say for her in the present generation. And, withal, she was a quaint, self-contained, self-dependent little soul, not taking much after either parent, but belonging to some far-back, long-forgotten Dutch type; while, ever and anon, there reappeared in her that curious likeness to her mother's English sister, which seemed at once to annoy and to touch Mrs. Vanderdecken.

She trotted through the park, this funny little maid, appearing and disappearing among the bushes, in her scarlet brightness, not unlike a cheery, plump, merry robin-redbreast.

It was one of those dull days, when, foreigners say, Englishmen are all inclined to go and hang themselves. The mossy walks, once so soft and green, were now spongy and sodden; dead leaves lay everywhere in rotting masses, except the few left on the trees, which fluttered mournfully against the murky sky. Everything was at the transition time when earth seems as if she could not reconcile herself to winter, but lies, abject and helpless, grieving over her own decay, with the

grief of a man over a wasted life, or a woman over her love-life all done.—Dark days, dreary days, whether in the year or in human existence; yet they must come to us all.

Ay, even to poor little Gertrude; though as yet she understood them not, nor seemed in the least affected by the gloominess of the day. She went gaily on, stamping on the wet moss, and leaving it in little ponds, shoe-shaped, behind her; or kicking the dead leaves about at every step, in exceeding fun. Soon she quite distanced the nurse, who, indeed, was only too glad to be let slip, and returned to the house, as was her custom, telling nobody—and well certain that Gertrude would tell nobody—of her absence; inconvenient candour being by no means the rule of the Vanderdecken household. So Gertrude came alone to her favourite play-place,—an odd-shaped ornamental pond,—possibly in far back centuries the original 'holy well.' Several oaks, now huge and hollow with age, with quantities of ferns, and even stray brambles, growing in their hearts and on the crevices of their gnarled arms, had been

planted round its brink. Also a yew-tree, whose enormous branches swept the water, and stretched over it almost to the island in the centre, which some later hand had made and adorned with rhododendrons and other flowering plants. A somewhat dreary spot, because it was not wholly Nature,—Nature never is dreary,—but had in it a forlorn mingling of art. But Gertrude made herself quite happy there, and after feeding her water-fowl, the only inhabitants of the spot, who swam towards her in a chilly appealingness, as if the black-looking pond were almost too much, even for ducks, she climbed to her favourite post —the arm of the largest oak-tree which overhung the water—and sat swinging there, Ophelia-like, —not singing, certainly, but indulging in castle-building, as this solitary rich man's child, so unlike both her parents, was rather prone to do.

Hers was, however, a very modest and matter-of-fact castle: nothing more than a pretty summer-house, which she would coax the gardener—Gertrude was hand-in-glove with all gardeners and humble folk on her father's property—

to build for her, and to which she would invite, if possible, who? . . . Casting her thoughts round about, she could find no better visitors, or more to her mind, than her aunt Edna's five boys, with cousin Julius at their head, if only cousin Julius —a big, manly youth—would only condescend to come. Perhaps there, under the influence of tea and cake and cousinly feeling, she might coax out of him what she was sure must be most romantic and mysterious—the whole history of his uncle and namesake, Julius Stedman.

In default of this, she began to invent it for herself, being in the habit of making up stories, heroic and pathetic at will. By-and-bye, she grew so absorbed in her own imaginations, that she let her muff drop off into the water, and was nearly following it herself, when a strong hand caught hold of her.

It was a man, who had crept near and been watching her intently for several minutes, only in her absorption she neither heard nor saw him. Probably he had not meant to be seen, since he had hidden himself behind the yew-tree, save

for the instinct which made him stretch out a hand to save the child from falling into the water.

'Take care, little miss,' said he, gruffly. 'That's an unsafe seat for a child like you. Are you alone?'

Yes, she was alone. Not a creature to protect her from the grim man, who spoke so roughly, as if he hated her, and was ready to do her any sort of mischief. But Gertrude was not a cowardly child; if frightened at all, it was usually at supernatural things; and this was only a man. In fact, as she perceived the minute she took courage to look at him closer, a man already known to her by sight—the poor soldier, who she believed had saved her life, and whom she had thought of a good deal since. Surely he never meant to harm her.

She did not scream, but looked him composedly in the face.

'Yes, I am quite alone. Why did you ask me? What are you going to do to me?'

'Do to you, simpleton! what should I do?

Eat you up, as the wolf ate Red Riding Hood? Do I look like it?'

And he laughed—a horrid kind of laugh, the poor little girl thought—and glared at her with the wildest eyes she had ever beheld, or ever imagined, in ogre or giant. Yet he was a small man, comparatively: thin, and sickly-looking; and while considerably frightened, she also felt sorry for him. Perhaps he was a little crazy; and she had heard that madmen ought to be humoured, and treated as if one were not the least afraid of them. So she answered, though inwardly quaking, as gently as she could,—

'You would be a very bad cruel man, to kill a poor little girl who never did you any harm.'

'Indeed!'

'And if you did kill me,' gathering courage as she spoke, 'you would be punished for it. Papa would have you hanged.'

The soldier laughed again. 'And how would that benefit you? For instance, your father's hanging me would not bring you back to life

again? Might comfort him, though; for revenge is sweet—very sweet ——'

And he went on muttering to himself the rest of his sentence.

Gertrude now grew seriously alarmed. She would have run away home; but the man leaned against the oak-tree trunk, and so blocked up her passage. She was compelled to remain sitting on the branch, with her poor little legs dangling over the pond. Thus they kept their positions, these two; for her gaoler seemed to have forgotten her presence, and dropped into a fit of musing, till at last Gertrude ventured to address him again.

'Please, kind man, let me go. It can't do you any good to be cruel to a little girl like me. I'm very sorry for you, you look so ill; and I would give you some money, only I have none in my pocket. But I'll tell mamma about you when she comes home.'

'Is she out, your mother?'

'Yes, out driving. You might wait for her at the lodge-gates, and she would be sure to give you something. She is very good—is my mamma.'

'That's a lie!' answered the soldier, fiercely.

Then the little maid forgot her fear in a sudden blaze of indignation.

'How dare you say so? What do you know of my mamma? She is a lady, and you only a common man: not even a gentleman, or you wouldn't talk to me about "lies."'

'Shouldn't I?' returned the man, eyeing in a sort of curiosity the small, fearless face, all ablaze with wrath. Then he said, 'You're not like her—not one bit. I won't harm you; you may step down. Allow me to assist you, Miss Vanderdecken.'

He offered her his hand with such a courteous air—not like an ogre at all, she thought, but more resembling the politeness of the young prince in the 'White Cat,' or the Beast, after Beauty had turned him human by loving him—that Gertrude regarded the man with dumb surprise. Instead of taking to her heels, as she had meant to do, she turned and offered to shake hands with him.

'Good-bye. You seem to know my name.

I am much obliged to you, and so will my mamma be. For she knows who you are'—(the soldier started)—'and so do I too.'

'Indeed! Who am I?'

'I think you are the man who pulled me from under the train one Saturday night. I have not said much about it since; for mamma does not like talking about unpleasant things; and she is easily frightened. But I knew quite well that but for you I should have been dead and buried, and gone to heaven by this time.'

He smiled at the quaint wording; but he could not deny the fact. In truth, with the peculiarity of his nature, in which impressions that seemed slight at first, instead of wearing out deepened down with time, during these three days it had more than once occurred to him, with a strange, creepy feeling, how very near he had been, and the child too, to the 'going to heaven' which she talked about,—going *together*. How odd such an accident would have appeared! and what a queer coincidence it would have been if they two had been dragged out dead from under

the train, and identified (as, though careless enough about himself living, he always took care his body should be identified),—himself and Mrs. Vanderdecken's little daughter!

Half in mockery, and yet drawn towards her by an attraction for which he could not account, and with not at all the sort of feeling which he expected to have had towards her, he intently examined the child.

'Would you have liked to "go to heaven," as you call it?'

Gertrude pondered a minute. 'No. At least not just yet, I think.'

'Why not?'

'Because I am quite happy as I am.'

'Happy!' echoed the man, and looked half contemptuously, half pitifully at the child. 'Is anybody happy, do you think? Is your mother happy?'

'Of course she is. No, stop a minute;' and the honest little face took an expression which, in its flitting, shadowy sweetness reminded the soldier of another,—far back in ghostly ages;

even as we sometimes see, with a start, the dead and the lost come back to us for a minute in the likeness of some little one of a new generation. 'No, I am afraid mamma is not always happy, for she sometimes tells me I am the only comfort she has; and I am sure that is very little.'

A gleam of satisfaction—wild satisfaction—lit up the countenance of the poverty-stricken soldier. 'Really! she is not happy? All her riches cannot make her happy; nor her husband neither? She and your father quarrel sometimes, don't they?'

The man seemed quite carried away out of himself, or he must have seen the astonishment, mixed with reproof, of the little girl's look.

'You must be a very odd sort of person, to talk to me in this way about my papa and mamma. What can you know of them? I am very, very sorry for you, and very grateful to you for saving my life; and any amount of money that papa could pay——' Here the little girl stopped, confused, touched by an instinct stronger than all her education.

'I suppose you think—doubtless your mother has taught you—that money can do everything: but it cannot. I want nothing. I know I saved your life; and I prefer to hold you in my debt for doing so. You may say this to your papa, if you like.'

Gertrude looked puzzled. 'I wish I could tell him, and then he might thank you, as I do. But papa knows nothing about this accident, or about you: mamma would not let me tell him.'

'Then she keeps secrets from him—from her own husband?' said the soldier, eagerly.

'I don't know what you mean by keeping secrets; and, indeed, if you will let me go away, I had rather not talk to you any more,' answered the little girl, almost beginning to cry, with a vague fear which she could not quite get over; while, at the same time, her keen sense of the romantic—and under her funny little Dutch outside there was a deal of romance in Gertrude Vanderdecken—was interested and excited to the highest degree.

The soldier had apparently meant more con-

versation; indeed, he had taken the trouble to divest himself of his overcoat, and made of it a cushion for the little girl on the tree-arm beside him: but now he took it up again.

'Very well: you can go whenever you like. Good-bye.'

'Good-bye.' Gertrude began walking off as fast as she could for twenty yards or so, then turned and looked behind her.

The man was sitting as she left him, with his elbows on his knees, gazing down into the black water. His appearance and attitude were so forlorn, so wretched—he seemed so utterly lonely, sitting there on the dreary December afternoon, with the damp white mist beginning to crawl over everything—that the little girl, who was going home to a good fire and a bright drawing-room, where she always shared her mamma's cosy five-o'clock tea, felt her heart melt towards him.

She returned, and touched him on the arm.

'I beg your pardon; I forgot one thing.

Tell me who you are, and where you live. If it is in this parish, I am sure mamma will come and see you; for she has her district, and goes round regularly, unless when she sends Nurse and me instead. And I should like to come and see you, too. What is your name?'

A simple question—the simplest possible, and given with the most innocent, up-looking, kindly eyes; yet it made the soldier start, grow pale, and then blush violently all over his face. He turned sharply away.

'What does my name matter to you? Why do you question me? What right has your mother to come and see me?'

'Oh, she always goes to see poor people, or sick people: all the ladies in the parish do. But she shall not come if you do not wish it. Indeed, if you dislike it so much, I will tell her nothing at all about you.'

'That's right!' said the man. And then, with a sudden thought, he added, 'If you will promise to tell your mother nothing at all about

me, I will meet you here every afternoon, if you like; and I 'll tell you all sorts of pretty stories and queer tales about foreign countries. I have been half over the world, I think, and seen curious things without end.'

'Have you really?' said Gertrude, opening wide eyes of delight. Here was an opportunity such as she had often longed for—an adventure delicious as any fairy tale; and the small fact of its being a surreptitious enjoyment did not lessen, but rather increased, the charm of it to this poor little soul, who had never been brought up in that holy atmosphere of simple truth which makes want of candour as impossible to the child as it is to the parent. There is a rough and bitter proverb, 'As the old cock crows the young cock learns;' and those who sow in small shams not unfrequently reap in large deceptions. In this case Gertrude's better nature made her hesitate a little. 'Mamma always bids me tell her everything; but then, to hear endless stories, as you say—oh! it would be so nice!'

'Very nice,' sneered the soldier; 'and all

true, of course. 'Everybody always tells the truth, your mamma included. Come, shall we make a bargain, and shake hands upon it?'

Yet as the warm little hand dropped upon his, in the sudden foolish confidence of childhood, on his side, too, the man's higher nature felt a slight upspringing of conscience, but he battened it down tight and close. To the little girl herself he knew he intended no harm, nay, he rather liked her than otherwise, and for aught else—what did it matter?

'Very well, my dear,' said he kindly, trying to teach himself to speak to her as he supposed children were accustomed to be spoken to. 'Then we have made what the Scotch call "a paction" between us. Take care you don't break it. I shall not.'

'Nor I. But'—her curiosity getting the better of her—'I should so like to know your name?'

'John Stone.'

'Thank you. And good-bye again, for I hear the carriage coming.'

She flew off like a bird—like the little winter robin that she so much resembled—and left him alone in the gloomy, darkening mist.

CHAPTER XXIII.

ALMOST daily, and for many days, John Stone the soldier, and little Miss Vanderdecken, met—accidentally it appeared, but nevertheless by design—in quiet nooks of the wintry, deserted park. Sometimes Gertrude's nurse was with them, sometimes not. At any rate, Stone contrived to secure the woman's fidelity, both by money and by talking to her in her native Hindostanee, she having been originally an ayah, brought from Calcutta to the Cape. This done, he had no other fear of premature discovery; for at Holywell Hall, as in most large establishments, the comings and goings of any individual item therein were scarcely noticed; not even though it were the young lady of the house. Besides, everybody

was accustomed to Miss Gertrude's independent proceedings, which formed such a contrast to her mother's graceful laziness; consequently, the carrying out of this surreptitious adventure was easy enough.

The only trouble in the matter was the child's own conscience, which sometimes woke up, and she begged leave to tell everything to her mamma; but Stone always quieted her with promises that she should do so very soon. Besides, he said, if she were ever found out, and asked any questions, she had nothing to do but to tell her mother the direct truth.

'But suppose mamma is angry with me, and forbids me to see you any more, what shall I do?'

She spoke in eager anxiety, for the fascination of this man's company, the charm of his talk, and the interest inspired by his looks and manner—so unlike a common soldier, and so very like, she thought, to a prince in disguise, as she every day expected he would turn out to be—had quite intoxicated the romantic child. She was not

exactly fond of him—was almost afraid of him sometimes, for he had such queer ways—such sudden bursts of excitement; and yet day and night she never got him out of her mind, and was always thirsting to meet him again, and hear something new.

'Your mamma angry?' repeated Stone, with a sneer. 'I thought fine ladies were never angry. However, in that case, just send her to me—John Stone, lodging at Mrs. Fox's of the "Goat and Compasses," and I'll make things straight for you directly.'

'Will you really? And will you explain to her that it was all because you made me make a promise, and I could not break it? People should never break their promises.'

'Did she teach you that?'

'No, but papa did; papa is very particular. He says, true in small things, true in great; that if you deceive one person, you'll be sure to deceive another; and he sometimes talks about all this in such a way that he makes mamma cry.'

'Why?' asked Stone, grasping at the family

skeleton which the child had betrayed, and investigating it with the zest of a ghoul burrowing into a grave.

'Oh, because she is a little frightened of him, I think; and yet he does not mean half he says. He is never unkind to me. Only he dislikes mamma's asking him for money; and sometimes he gets into a passion and calls her ugly names, and she begins to sob, and wishes she had never married; and it makes me so unhappy, you can't think. But I ought not to tell you all this.'

'It's no matter.—I'll not tell again. I can keep a secret. Besides, I have nobody to tell it to.'

'Have you no relations—nobody at all belonging to you?'

Stone shook his head.

'I wish you had had a little girl of your own for me to play with. You were never married, I suppose?'

'No.'

'But you had a father and mother—perhaps brothers and sisters, once?'

'No sisters.'

'Oh, what a pity! It must be so nice to have a sister. I have no relations at all; at least, none that I shall ever see much of. But that is a secret too,' added the child, looking graver. 'I can't imagine why it is, but mamma cannot bear my talking much about my aunt—the only one I have—aunt Edna.'

The soldier started. He had been sitting with the child beside him, in the hollow of an old oak, telling his Munchausen-like stories, of which how much was fiction, how much fact, he alone knew; and afterwards he had fallen into a sort of dream, as he was prone to do, watching the sunset, and listening to a wren on a tree-top near, singing as loud and merrily as if it were the year's beginning instead of its close. Now he seemed startled out of his meditations into exceeding agitation.

'I beg your pardon, say that name again. I was not listening. Your aunt who?'

'Aunt Edna, mamma's only sister; indeed I never knew she had a sister till about a year ago,

when in driving through London mamma saw the name on a door—Dr. Stedman. That is aunt Edna's husband. He is a doctor, you must know.'

'And he lives—where?'

'In Brook Street, Hanover Square,' answered the little maid, delighted with the importance of giving information. 'It is but a little house. When mamma called there, she wondered how they could live in such a pokey hole, but she supposed it was because they were poor still?'

'Poor?'

'That is, compared with us; but I don't think they can be really poor people; or if they are, they don't mind it. They all look so happy and merry—aunt Edna and her five sons.'

'Five sons, has she?' said Stone, who after his first violent start had settled down into an attitude which he was prone to fall into—stooping forward with his hand over his eyes. He said he had had moon-blindness, and sometimes wore green spectacles. 'And—her husband—your uncle?'

'Oh, you mean Dr. Stedman. Of course, he is my uncle; but I have never seen him. We have only called once, and they never come here.'

'Why not?'

'Nobody seems to want it, except me. But I want it very much. I should so like to have my cousins to play with, especially cousin Julius.'

Stone sprung up, and then suddenly sat down again, catching hold of a half-rotten branch, and breaking it in little bits as he spoke.

'I beg your pardon. Go on, child. Tell me all about your aunt, and uncle, and cousins.'

'Would you really like to hear?' cried Gertrude, highly deliglited. 'Not that there is much to tell; for I know so very little about them. But they live in Brook Street, as I said, and they are such a happy family, and seem so fond of one another. Two of the boys are bigger than aunt Edna—she is a very little woman, you must know—and they pet her and play with her, and yet seem so proud of her. They tell her everything,

Julius says, just as mamma desires me to tell *her*,' added the child, sighing—'only, somehow, I can't. Don't you think there is something about a person which makes you tell them things? But you can't do it, just because they desire you, any more than you could love people because they compelled you to love them.'

The little girl had hit upon a great mystery—perhaps the greatest mystery in parental government; but no such ethical or moral question interested the soldier. Yet he did seem interested—keenly—painfully, in what she was saying.

'Go on. Tell me more.'

'About aunt Edna and her house? Oh, I am sure it must be the happiest house in the world. No wonder they don't care to come to ours.'

'Is that so? Who says it?'

'Mamma.'

'Oh, then of course it must be true.'

'I wish you saw my aunt Edna. I do like her so!' cried Gertrude, enthusiastically. 'She is not pretty, and not a fine lady at all—dresses

very plainly; but then she is so bright, and sweet, and kind. The first time I saw her, she took me on her knee and kissed me, and cried a little, saying to mamma that she once had a dear little girl of her own, but it died when a baby. However, she seems very happy with her five boys. Oh, I could be so fond of aunt Edna if they would let me! But—hark! I think I hear wheels. I must run indoors before mamma comes home. Good-bye.'

'Good-bye,' said Stone. He had seemed to pay little attention to her latter words; but when she was quitting him, he called her back. 'Stop. Your uncle is a doctor, you say. I might want one. I am ill enough sometimes. Give me his address.'

Gertrude gave it eagerly.

'Oh, do go to him. I am sure he would do you good. And then, perhaps, you would see aunt Edna, and my cousins, and would tell me all about them when you come back. Only you had better say nothing to them about me.'

'Of course not.'

'I wonder,' said the little girl, lingering, as a sudden brilliant idea struck her, 'whether you, having been at Calcutta, and actually sailed up the Hooghly river, might know anything about—about ——'

'What?'

'Oh, nothing particular. Yes, it is something particular, as I can guess from mamma's telling me never to speak about it. There is a secret which, if I could only find it out, might be as interesting as any of the stories you have told to me. Listen:'—and she placed her lips to his ear in the approved fashion of mystery-mongers:—'Cousin Julius told me that he had, once upon a time, an uncle.'

This communication made nothing like the impression she intended. Stone heard it, sitting, rigid as his name, with his eyes fixed on the ground. At last he said—

'Is he alive?'

'No—dead many years ago, mamma told me.'

The soldier started a little.

'How did he die—how did she say he died?' asked he, after a pause.

'He was drowned in the Hooghly. But there 's nurse beckoning. I must run. Good-bye.'

'Good-bye;' and Stone sat where she had left him, pondering.

'Dead!—drowned!' he repeated to himself, and then laughed. 'Dead, years ago! Well, it 's all true—all true; and better so.'

He rose, hearing the rumble of distant carriage-wheels, and hurried by a short cut to a corner of the park, where he generally lingered at this hour, behind a thick holly-bush which was near the park-gates. Thence, he could watch Mrs. Vanderdecken drive slowly through in her phaeton, or brougham, or landaulet—she had an endless variety of carriages—but always alone, always dull, as if nothing in this world ever had given, or could give her pleasure.

When she had passed, Stone started up from his hiding-place, and ranged wildly over bush and brake, like a man out of his senses, till he came out upon the common, where, seeing decent la-

bourers walking decently homewards in twos and threes, he also did the same, and soon found himself at Mrs. Fox's door.

The good woman had been very kind to him, though, as she told confidentially all her neighbours, she thought him a little 'cracked.' But as he was quite harmless, and paid his bill regularly —every morning, because, he said, no one knew what might happen before night—she did not object to have him staying with her. He had his meals in her parlour; gave hardly any trouble; went early to bed, and was late to rise; never complaining of either his food or his lodging. He took very little notice of anybody, yet there was in him a pathetic gentleness, which won the heart of every creature—certainly every woman —who had anything to do with him.

'I 'll be bound he has seen better days, and had folk mighty fond of him some time,' was Mrs. Fox's deliberate opinion. 'What has brought him to this pass, goodness knows.'

'Drink perhaps,' somebody suggested.

But Mrs. Fox indignantly repelled this accu-

sation, though she owned he sometimes looked as if he had been drinking, and besides his tobacco there was now and then a queer smell in his room, like a druggist's shop. But it was not brandy, she was certain: nothing ever passed his lips but water in her sight, and if out of it, she would soon have discovered the fact, for she was a great lover of temperance, even though she kept a public-house.

So, much as they talked him over, the little circle which revolved round the 'Goat and Compasses' could come to no conclusion about John Stone, except that he was rather queer, but certainly not sufficiently crazy to be treated as a lunatic. Still, they let him alone as much as possible: all save the good landlady, who, partly from a love of patronising, and partly through real kindness, took him in her charge entirely, and it must be owned, very devotedly.

'Mrs. Fox, what is the earliest train to London to-morrow?'

She was so amazed at the question, that she forgot her ordinary deference, which rather in-

creased than diminished, the more she had to do with Mr. (as she now always called him) Stone.

'My dear soul, you don't mean to say you're going up to London?'

'Yes.'

'Well, I am glad of it. It'll amuse you, maybe. Is it for good, or only for a day or two?'

"Only for a day or two. "For good," as you say, I am not likely to go anywhere. I shall leave my traps with you, and return very soon. Come, come, I daresay in your heart you're not sorry to be rid of me.'

The old woman shook her head with one of her sententious remarks.

'Them as their friends is glad to get rid of, Mr. Stone, are generally them as have never tried to make 'em want 'em. You're no trouble here—quite a pleasure; and you'd better stop with me till you goes back direct to your own folks.'

This latter was a thrust, deliberate and pru-

dential, for she often felt her responsibility very great, and would have been really thankful to find out something definite respecting the lonely, sickly man, who might at any time fall ill, or even die upon her hands; but Stone took no notice of what she had said. Indeed, after the matter of the train was fixed, he scarcely spoke another word, but smoked incessantly till he went to bed.

He was very late up, so late that he nearly missed his breakfast and his chance of a lift to the station in the butcher's cart, which Mrs. Fox had kindly arranged for him. And as she started him off he looked so haggard, so feeble, that she shook her head more ominously than ever.

'He'll drop off some day like the snuff of a candle. I wish I knew who his friends were, and I'd write to 'em, with his leave or without it, that's all.'

But the busy and the poor have not too much time even for compassion, and before Stone was a mile away even his kindly hostess had forgotten him.

Not a thought from her, or any human being, followed the solitary soldier as he took his journey, and at length found himself dropped into the wild whirl of London streets, which he trod with an uncertain step and dazed, bewildered air, as of a man who had never been there before, or so many years ago, that his experience was no help to him now whatever.

Besides all this, he had at first a frightened look, as if he expected continually to be recognised or spoken to—a fancy which country people often have, till they understand London better. London—that mad Babel—so crowded, yet so intensely lonely, that among the myriads one jostles against, to meet a known face is almost an impossible chance. So he was drifted on—this atom, this nomad, this forlorn bit of humanity—in the great human tide that went surging right and left down either side the street. Gradually he let himself be swept on by it, as unimportant and unnoticed as a bubble down a stream.

He turned westward, more by instinct than design, apparently—for he walked like a man

half blind and stunned. By slow degrees, however, he seemed to grow accustomed to the crowd; breasted it less awkwardly and timorously, and looked around him a little, as if trying to recollect the places he saw—above all, to recollect himself.

He had got on as far as the Cheapside corner leading to St. Paul's Churchyard, when the sudden boom of the great cathedral bell striking eleven o'clock, sent such a shock through his frail, nervous frame, that he leaned staggering against a shop-window.

'Hollo, man, are you drunk, or what?' cried a passer-by, catching hold of him, but meeting no answer, no resistance, let him go again. 'You're ill, sir. You'd better get into a cab and go home;' but there was no cab at hand, so the stranger hailed an omnibus, which Stone silently indicated as it passed, and civilly helped him into it, perhaps feeling that he was safer among companions than alone.

The omnibus was full of the usual average of omnibus passengers, all busy, and self-absorbed,

every one going his own way, and paying little heed to his neighbour. Nobody noticed Stone, who turned his face to the glass and watched the gliding by of the various familiar objects along the great western outlet from the City. They were scarcely changed. London looked precisely as he had left it, even after this long interval of years. It seemed only yesterday that he had taken his last omnibus ride homeward on this very route, the day he left England, a young man, with life all before him and nothing behind. Now?

Well, we all of us must meet such crises; times when some sharp sudden curve of the river of life brings us face to face with the lost past, and we stand and gaze on it for a moment or two —startled, saddened, or smitten with intolerable pain—then, knowing it irrecoverable, turn our backs upon it, and go on, like our neighbours, our inevitable way.

Most men, who have at all neared their half century of existence, can understand this feeling;

but then few have such a past to look back upon as John Stone.

He rode on a good distance, and then got out and walked, through the quietest and least frequented streets of the West-end, losing himself several times. The only place he stopped at was, oddly enough, an upholsterer's shop, in the window of which there happened to be for sale a large swing glass. Stone looked at himself, carefully, from head to foot.

His was a figure, certainly peculiar, but not peculiar enough to attract notice among the many odd fishes who swim safely and unobserved through London streets. Spare and short—the shortest stature admissible by the regulation height of the army—the faded scarlet just glimmering under his grey coat, the foraging cap pulled closely over his brows, and the rest of his face almost hidden by his spectacles and long beard, any special personal appearance he had was so concealed, that his own mother might have passed him in the street and not have known him.

Apparently, he satisfied himself as to the result of his self-examination, for shortly, paying no heed to the jeer of a small London boy, that 'p'raps he 'd know that 'ere party agin when he met him,' Stone turned away from the mirror and passed on—walking much more confidently than before.

He reached at last Brook Street, that favourite habitat of physicians and other strictly respectable, but not ultra-fashionable people, and walked right down it till he came to Dr. Stedman's door.

A quiet, unpretending door it was, and belonging to one of those small houses, at least much smaller than the rest, which are sometimes to be found in this neighbourhood. The brougham standing opposite to it was of the same character; a neat doctor's carriage, arranged with all appliances for books, &c.—evidently that of a man who works too hard not to economise time as well as money by every possible expedient. The coachman, a decent, elderly man—one of those servants who are not only thoroughly re-

spectable, but confer respectability on their employers—sat on his box, waiting patiently for his master.

He had not to wait long. Punctually at twelve o'clock Dr. Stedman came out, and stood on the door-step, talking to a poor woman who had just run up to him: so that the soldier, if he wished it, had a full opportunity of observing the physician whom he had said he might consult some day.

Dr. William Stedman—as his door-plate had it—was a tall, strongly built, middle-aged gentleman: fair-featured—a little florid perhaps—but with the ruddiness of health only. He was muscular, but not stout, and very wholesome-looking, even though he was a doctor and lived in London. His mouth was placid, his eyes were kind. His whole appearance was that of a man who has fought his battle of life somewhat hardly, but has got through the worst of it, and begins now to put a cheerful sickle into the harvest of his youth—to reap what he has sown, and prepare to go forth rejoicing with his sheaves.

A season, often the very best and brightest of existence to such a man: and the very bitterest to a man who has come to his harvest time with no harvest ready, and finds out the awful, inexorable truth, that whosoever has sown the wind must reap the whirlwind.

While Dr. Stedman stood, talking to his patient or applicant—a very poorly-clad and sad-faced woman—John Stone watched him intently. He even crept on a little further, holding by area-railings as he went, that he might see him better, and so remained, until the physician, having finished his talk with the woman, dismissed her, and then, as with a second thought, called her back, took her into his carriage, and drove away.

When he was gone Stone clung to the railings, tight and fast. One of his violent fits of coughing seized him, and for a little he could hardly stand or speak.

No one took any notice of him—those things are too common in London. He came to himself soon, and then paused to consider what he should

do. Bodily exhaustion guided him as much as anything, and the horrible fear that he might drop in the street. He went into the nearest shop, a baker's, and asked for a penny loaf and a glass of water. But after he had munched a few mouthfuls, he put the food aside, and taking out of his pocket a queer little eastern-looking box, which emitted a still queerer smell—not tobacco—he extracted and ate a small fragment out of it contents.

'What's that?' asked the baker's wife, uneasily. 'Not poison?'

'Oh, no! It's my physic—my food—my drink—my chief comfort in life, I assure you!' said Stone, in an excited manner, as laying down sixpence and forgetting to take up the change, he hurried out of the shop, and was soon lost once more in the maze of London streets.

Lost—how sad a word it is—how sad and yet how common! And who are the lost? Not the dead—God keeps them, safe and sure; though how and where we know not, until we go the way they all have gone. But the living lost—

the sinners, who have been over-tempted and have fallen—the sinned against, who have been hunted and tortured into crime—the weak ones, half good, half bad, with whom it seems the chance of a straw whether they shall take the right way or the wrong—who shall find them? He will one day, we trust; He who in His whole universe loses, finally, nothing.

Poor Stone had much of this 'lost' look, as he wandered about London; uncertainly, idly, like a man who has given up all stake in life and takes no particular interest in anything. Sometimes he stopped at a shop-window, generally a print-shop, and vacantly gazed at its contents, but he never lingered long anywhere, and being in his exterior neither a beggar nor a rogue, but just up to the decent level which makes a man an object neither of fear nor compassion to his fellow-creatures, he was not much noticed by anybody, but just allowed to go his own way—to work or be idle—feed or starve—live or die, as it pleased himself and Providence.

Wherever he wandered, during that long day,

Stone always came back to the little house in Brook Street, hovering about it as a ghost might haunt its body's grave; walking to and fro, sometimes on one side of the street and then on the other, and watching every one who went in and out.

There were many, for Dr. Stedman's seemed both a full and a busy house. People were perpetually coming and going, not a few with those eager, anxious countenances that are ever haunting a doctor's abode. He appeared to have a good practice, and to be not without friends, for several daintily-dressed lady visitors called; and one or two gentlemen in carriages, grave, professional, eminently respectable—the sort of connexions which gather round a man when he begins to rise in the world, and the world discovers that it may be rather proud of him than otherwise.

John Stone the soldier saw all these things. Pacing the street, and sometimes, that he might awaken no suspicion, hanging about with other forlorn and shabby-looking loungers on area-steps

and at shop-windows, he watched with hungry glances the continually opening door. Once, struck by a sudden impulse, he even went up to it, and laid his hand upon it, but just that minute two young lads came springing up the steps behind him, all life and gaiety.

'Hallo, here's an old soldier. Did you want my father, eh, old man?' looking into the stranger's face with a frank, bright smile, which carried with it such a ghostly likeness, that, after a moment's eager glance at the lad, Stone, trembling like an aspen, shook his head in silent negative, and went shambling away.

'They must be his boys, of course,' muttered he to himself. 'Such big lads! *His* boys. It seems like dreaming. But I'm always dreaming.' And he laughed, but the laugh was half a moan.

After a few minutes, the two lads reappeared, bringing out with them in triumph a little lady, well furred and cloaked, and evidently prepared to meet the still damp day and enjoy it as much as either of her sons. For mother and sons they

were, there was no mistaking that. The elder gave her his arm, patronisingly and tenderly, as if it were a new right which he was rather proud of claiming, while the younger walked beside her, seizing by force her umbrella and bag, and flourishing them about with great liveliness. Both lads were so full of themselves, and of her, guarding her on either side, and enjoying her company with undisguised delight, that they were rather regardless of passers-by, and the elder brushed past Stone somewhat roughly.

'Take care, Julius,' said the lady, in a gentle, feminine voice, fit to win over any number of boys, and yet rule them too, for there was neither weakness nor indecision in it. Then turning to the soldier, she added, 'I beg your pardon; my son did not mean to be rude to you.'

Stone made no reply, and, after a passing glance at him, she walked on. However, ere crossing the street, she looked back and said a word or two to her second son, who immediately came and spoke to him, civilly and kindly.

'Are you not well? Is there anything I can do for you?'

'No, nothing. Let me alone!' said Stone sharply, and hurried away.

A few minutes after, however, he was haunting the same street—the same door. Almost that instant the doctor drove up to it, when two little lads, not long past babyhood, going out with their nurse, blocked his way.

'Papa, papa!' rose in unison, a perfect shriek of welcome.

Dr. Stedman stopped and tossed them up, one after the other, in his strong arms.

'My Castor and Pollux, is it you?'

'We're not Castor and Pollux, we're David and Jonathan. Papa, give us another toss.'

'Not to-day, I'm very busy. Run away, Gemini. Nurse, is mamma at home?'

And hearing she was not, a momentary cloud crossed his face.

'Ah, well, she'll be back by dinner-time, and so shall I. Tell her so.' And he hurried in with the preoccupied look of a man who has no

idle moments to lose. Very soon he came out again, and was hastening to his carriage, when his quick eye caught sight of the figure leaning against his area-railings.

'Did you want me, my good man? Any message? Are you a patient of mine?'

'No.'

'I don't remember your face. But you look ill. I am unfortunately in haste,' taking out his watch; 'but still, I could spare fully three minutes, if you wanted to consult me.'

'No.'

'Good afternoon, then.'

'Good afternoon.'

Pre-occupied as he evidently was, the kind physician gave one half-compassionate glance behind him, then closed his carriage-door and drove away. John Stone stood in the street alone.

Yes, quite alone now—alone as few men ever are until death. He had come hither with no definite intention beyond the natural impulse of most men, to see old places and familiar faces

again. Afterwards, driven by some vague yearning, some last clinging to this world and all its tender ties, he had experimentalized thus on a mere chance, hardly knowing whether he wished to succeed or fail. He had failed.

It was neither improbable nor unnatural that he should have done so, and yet the certainty of it smote him hard.

'I am quite safe,' he said, bitterly. 'Nobody knows me. I may go among them all as harmless as a ghost.'

And not unlike a ghost he felt—a poor, wandering ghost revisiting the upper world, where his place was now as completely filled up as, perchance, even the best-beloved, most honoured dead would find theirs, could they return after a season to the hearths they sat at, the friends and kindred who once loved them so well; ay, and love them still, only with a different sort of love. It seems sad, and yet it is but a law of nature, most righteous, most merciful, if we look at it as we believe our dead do, grieving no more, either

over themselves or us, but rejoicing in their new and perfect existence.

But Stone was a living man still, and he found his lot hard to bear; yet it was, in some sense, his own choosing. He had slipped away, first in madness, and then with a stunned indifference to life and all its duties; suffering himself to drop without a struggle into the great sea of sorrow, which at some crisis in our lives is ever ready to overwhelm each one of us. It had closed over him. He had gained his desire. Years of oblivion had rolled between, changing the terrible present into a harmless past; and now his own place and his own people knew him no more.

He turned into Hanover Square, and walked round and round it, in the gloom of the early dusk, avoiding the houses and keeping to the inner circle, where a white frosty fog hung over the trees like a shroud.

'It's all right,' he muttered, talking to himself, as was his habit—the habit of most solitary people. 'They are happy, perfectlg happy, as

they deserve to be. They have wholly forgotten me. Of course; they could not but forget. I wished them to forget me. What was there to remember except pain? And yet—oh, Will! —kind, loving, good old Will!'

A sharp sob broke his words. Ashamed, he turned to see if any chance passer-by was near him; but there was no one. The place was as London squares are on a winter evening—lonely as a desert.

'Five sons the child said he had. Plenty to keep up the name—the honest, honourable name —which he used to say I should make famous some day. I? What a mockery it seems now! Five sons. Not a bad help for a man when he grows old. That eldest—the big fellow, so like his father—must be the one that was the baby. *She* used to pet him and play with him.'

He ground his teeth as he spoke, and talking to himself no more, sped on round and round the circle, like a man possessed; sometimes stopping from sheer exhaustion, and then hurrying on again as if there were an evil spirit behind him.

At length, quite worn out, he crawled back to the old spot—the bright little house in Brook Street.

It looked doubly bright in the now thickly gathering darkness of the street. The venetian blinds had been drawn down, but not closed, so that any one looking through the interstices could see into the room quite plainly.

A cosy dining-room, warm and cheerful; gilt-framed prints shining on the crimson-papered walls; a large bookcase at one end; a mirror and sideboard, garnished with what looked like presentation plate, goblets, a claret-jug, &c., on the other; between, the shining, white-spread family dinner-table, with chairs all round it, evidently meant to be filled as full as it could hold. Standing on the hearth-rug, apparently waiting and watching, but knitting still—for the firelight flickered on the glancing needles, and made a star of light out of one fine diamond which glittered on the rapid little hands—was a figure that looked like the good fairy, the presiding genius, the guardian angel of the whole.

She was a little person, thin and fragile, more so perhaps than a matron should be, and her face was not without a look of care—or rather the faint shadow of care gone by. And when it fell into repose there was, as there is in almost all faces past their youth, a slight sadness, enough to make you feel that *she* had felt, and understood, sorrow. Her hair was already whitening under her little lace cap, and her black silk dress had not the slightest pretence of girlishness about it. Yet there was a youthfulness, light and gay, and an almost childish sweetness in both face and figure, that withstood all the wear and tear of time. It made folk say, even ordinary friends, but especially her boys and her husband, 'Ah, mamma will never be an old woman.' No, never: for while her heart beat it would be a young heart still. When, more than once, at the sound of wheels she lifted up her face to listen, the brightness that came into her eyes was like that of a girl hearing the lover's footstep outside the door.

Stone watched her; clinging meanwhile to the railings, grasping them hard, as if the cold iron had been a warm, loving hand. Perhaps for a minute his heart misgave him—his bitter, cynical, unbelieving heart. One step, one word, and might he not pass out of the loneliness and cold into—what? Would it be a welcome? After all these years, all this change, would it be a welcome? He looked down on his rags—they were becoming such, for his money was dwindling away; he put his hand to his head, where the deadly food which he had been chewing at intervals since morning was slowly but surely confusing his faculties, making him more and more unfit for and averse to all society, or anything that might snatch him out of the drugged nocturnal elysium which alone enabled him to bear the torments of the day.

'No—no; too late! To them I should only be a burden and a shame. Better as it is—better as it is.'

And just as the doctor's carriage drove up,

and the door opening of itself, showed a dainty head leaning anxiously forward from the lighted hall, Stone slunk back hastily, and staggered away, round the street corner, into the misty square.

Half-an-hour afterwards he crawled back again, but by that time the venetian blind had been closed; the house was all dark. Only through an inch of the upper sash, which was left open for air—it was such a small house for a large family—the hungry, weary, shivering man fancied he could hear the clatter of knives and forks, the chatter of lively voices, around the cheerful dinner-table, where parents and children met together after the labours and pleasures of the day.

'Will!—Edna!' he called, but faintly, and as hopeless of reply as a bodiless spirit might feel, vainly trying to make itself known to the living flesh and blood unto whom it was once so near. 'Will—Edna—you were fond of me once, and I was fond of you. I'll not harm you,

or trouble you. Be happy!—It is quite true—I am dead, dead—long ago. Good-bye!'

He hurried away and was soon lost in London streets—the glaring, splendid, wicked, miserable streets—once more. Lost!—lost!—lost!

CHAPTER XXIV.

'MAMMA, only listen.'

'Please do, mammy darling!'

'Lovey! we 'll be so good.'

'Children, will you hold your tongues, and not speak more than three at a time? The dear little mother is perfectly deafened with you.'

Mrs. Stedman smiled at her eldest son—her 'right-hand,' as she often called him—her grave, kind, helpful Julius; but it being, as he said, quite impossible for her to hear herself speak just then, she only shook her head with a Burleigh-like solemnity, and waited till the outburst subsided.

She had all her young flock at home for the holidays, which, especially in winter, most mothers

will recognise as a position not the easiest in the world. Yet Edna was well fitted to be the mother of boys. Within her tiny feminine body lurked a spirit unconquerable even by the husband who adored her, and the sons who inherited their own from her. Bright, brave, active, decided, she had learnt to hold her own in midst of the most tumultuous state of things, as she did this day. And however gently she might utter it, all knew and recognised that her yea was yea, and her nay nay. No one ever attempted to gainsay or dispute either.

There are bad women—God have mercy on them! fallen angels, worse than any men—by whom lovers, husbands, sons, are led on to destruction; but almost worse than these are weak women, who have sufficient good in them to make them half loved while they are wholly despised, by the men belonging to them. Now, whether Mrs. Stedman's sons loved her or not, it was at once seen that they respected her; respected her as gentle, wise firmness is ever respected; and relied on her, as upon quiet strength, whether

of man or woman, children always learn to rely.

Silence being restored, she said—

'No, boys; I am very sorry for you, but you cannot go skating to-day. The ice is not thick enough.'

'But, mamma, I saw ever so many on it when Bob and I walked down to the Serpentine after breakfast.'

'You did not go on it yourselves?'

'Of course not. We promised, you know,' said Will, with an injured air, at which his mother patted him on the shoulder tenderly.

'That's my good boy—my good boys, whom I can always rely on. It is hard for you, I allow that; and many harum-scarum, fool-hardy lads may tell you that your mother is a great coward ——'

'No, no, no,' cried all the lads in chorus, and declared she was the 'pluckiest' little mother that ever lived.

'Very well,' she answered, laughing; 'I am glad you think so.' And then seriously, 'No,

boys, I hope I can bear inevitable risks, nor do I shrink from lawful dangers. Julius will have one of these days to take his turn at the fever hospital; Will may go in for a Civil Service examination, and be off to India, and Robert turn sheep-farmer in Australia, as soon as his schooling is done. I'll hinder none of you from risking life in doing your duty; but I will hinder you, so long as you are in my care, from throwing away your lives in a reckless manner. A pleasant thing for papa and me if you went out this forenoon, and were brought home at dinner-time—drowned!'

'Ju says I'm born to be hanged, and so I shall never be drowned,' observed Bob, dryly.

'Drowned,' repeated Will, meditatively. Will was the clever one of the family; always striking out new and brilliant ideas. 'It would be a curious thing to try what drowning is like. People say it is the easiest death that any one can die—quite pleasant indeed. Mamma, did you ever know anybody who was drowned?'

'Hush!' said the eldest brother, quick to

notice the slightest shadow in his mother's face. 'You forget Uncle Julius was drowned.'

No more questions were asked. Though the children knew no particulars, they were well aware that over the life and death of this unknown uncle, their father's only brother, hung a tender, sad mystery, which made their mother grave whenever his name was mentioned; and their father sometimes looked at Will, who was thought to resemble him—looked, and turned away with a sigh. And when sometimes, being deluded, as fathers delight to be, into telling tales of his own boyhood to his boys, these adventures chanced to include Uncle Julius, he would break off abruptly, and his hearty merriment changed into the saddest silence. Also the elders noticed that, except concerning those boyish days, their father never spoke much of Uncle Julius. Whether the latter had done something 'naughty,' though nobody ever hinted at such a thing, or whether he had been very unhappy or very unfortunate, the lads could none of them satisfactorily decide, though they often held long arguments with one another

on the subject. But one thing was quite clear—Uncle Julius must have been a remarkable person, and very dearly loved by both their parents.

So, being boys trained from babyhood in the sweet tact which springs from lovingness, they let Will's *mal-àpropos* remark pass by without comment, and hung round their mother caressingly till they brought her back to her own bright self again.

'Yes,' she said, laughing, 'you are very good boys, I own, though you do worry mamma pretty well sometimes.'

'Do we, darling? We'll never do so any more.'

'Oh, no; not till the next time. There, there, you babies!'

And she resigned her little fur-slippered foot for the twins to cuddle—the rosy, fat, good-tempered twins, rolling about like Newfoundland puppies on the hearth-rug—laid one hand on Bob's light curls, suffered Will to seize the other, and leant her head against the tall shoulder of her eldest son, who petted his mother just as if

she had been a beautiful young lady. Thus 'sub-divided,' as she called it, Edna stood among her five sons; and any stranger observing her might have thought she had never had a care. But such a perfect life is impossible; and the long gap of years that there was between Robert and the twins, together with one little curl—that, wrapped in silver paper, lay always at the bottom of the mother's housekeeping purse—could have told a different tale.

However, this was her own secret, hidden in her heart. When with her children, she was as merry as any one of them all.

'Come now,' said she, 'since you are such good boys, and give up cheerfully your pleasures, not because mother wishes it, but because it is right ——'

'And also because mother wishes it,' lovingly remarked Julius.

'Well, well, I accept it as such; and in return I 'll make you all a handsome present—of my whole afternoon.'

Here uprose a shout of delight, for every one

knew that the most valuable gift their mother could bestow on them was her time, always so well filled up, and her bright, blithe, pleasant company.

'It is settled then, boys. Now decide. Where will you take me to? Only it should be some nice warm place. Mamma cannot stand the cold quite as you boys do. You must remember she is not so young as she used to be.'

'She is—she is!' cried the sons in indignant love; and the eldest pressed her to his warm young breast almost with the tears in his eyes. That deep affection—almost a passion—which sometimes exists between an eldest son and his mother, was evidently very strong here.

'I know what place mamma would like best—next best to a run in the country, where, of course, we can't go now—I propose the National Gallery.'

Which was rather good of Bob, who, of himself, did not care twopence for pictures; and when the others seconded the motion, and it was carried unanimously, his mother smiled a special

'thank you' to him, which raised the lad's spirits exceedingly.

It was a lively walk through the Christmas streets, bright with holly and evergreens, and resplendent with every luxury that the shops could offer to Christmas purchasers. But Edna's boys bought nothing, and asked for nothing. They and she looked at all these treasures with delighted but unenvious eyes. They had been brought up as a poor man's children, even as she was a poor man's wife—educated from babyhood in that noble self-denial which scorns to crave for anything which it cannot justly have. There was less need for carefulness now, and every time the mother looked at them—the five jewels of her matron crown—she thanked God that they would never be dropped into the dust of poverty; that, humanly speaking, there would be enough forthcoming, both money and influence, all of their father's own righteous earning, to set them fairly afloat in the world—before William and she laid down their heads together in the quiet sleep after toil—of which she began to think

perhaps a little more than she used to do, years ago.

Yet when the boys stopped her before tempting jewellers' or linendrapers' shops, making her say what she liked best, Edna would answer to each boy's question as to what he should give her 'when he got rich'—

'Nothing, my darling, nothing. I think your father and I are the richest people in all this world.'

When she got into the National Gallery, and more than one person turned to look after her—the little mother with such a lot of tall boys—Mrs. Stedman carried her head more erect than usual, and a Cornelia-like conceitedness dimpled round her mouth. Then, she being slightly fatigued—she was not the very strongest little woman in the world—Julius settled her carefully in the most comfortable seat he could find, and left her there in the midst of the pre-Raffaellite saints and martyrs, and mediæval Holy Families, to spend some quiet minutes in pleasures which throughout her busy life had been so

rare. For many of Edna's special tastes, as well as her husband's, had been of necessity smothered down. In the long uphill struggle of their early married life, luxuries had been impossible. During all the years when her little ones were young she had read few books, scarcely seen a picture, and confined her country pleasures to watching the leaves bud and grow green and fall, in Hyde Park or Kensington Gardens. It was rarely that the busy mother got even a few minutes' rest like this to go back to the day-dreams of her youth—now fading away in the realities, sad or sweet, of her maturer years.

She almost felt like a girl again, as after a brief rest she rose, and took leisurely the circuit of the room, where many an old familiar picture looked at her with ghostly eyes—pictures fixed on her memory during the days when Letty and Julius, she and William, used to haunt this place. The years between seemed to collapse into nothing, and for a moment or two she felt almost as she felt then—at the outset of her life, in the tender dawn of her love: her heart full of hope

that coloured everything rose-hue, and faith in God and man that never knew a cloud.

Well, that time had gone by for them all four. She and William were middle-aged parents now; Letty and Julius—poor Letty! poor Julius!—she hardly knew which to grieve over most, the living or the dead.

So had passed all these passing shows of mortal life, fleet as a shadow that departeth; and still the fair Saint Catherine stood beside her wheel, smiling her martyr's smile, and Del Piombo's ghostly Lazarus arose out of the dark sepulchre, and the numberless Madonnas who used to thrill Edna's heart with an exquisite foreboding of what mother-bliss must be, sat, calm as ever, holding their Divine children in their arms—always children, who never grew up, never died. And Edna thought of her own little lost baby—her one girl-baby of three months old—and tried to fancy how she looked now, perhaps not unlike these. Continually, amongst all her living children—her perpetual daily blessings—came the memory of this one, a blessing too,

as our dead should always be to us, more and more perhaps the older we grow, since they bridge over the gulf between us and the world unseen. Edna was not the less a happy and a cheerful mother, that besides all these breathing, laughing, loving children, she had still another child—a little silent angel, waiting for her in the celestial land.

While she was thinking of these things, in her own peaceful way, and enjoying the old delicious atmosphere of beauty and grace, which had been the fairy-land of her youth, her boy Robert, after romping about, tormenting alternately his two elders and the twins, came back to her.

'Mamma,' said he, in a loud whisper, 'there's a very grand lady staring at you, and has been for ever so long. She looks as if she wanted to speak to you, but couldn't make up her mind. Do you know her?'

Edna looked round. No mistaking the stately figure, the sweeping satin robes.

'Yes, I know her,' blushing while she spoke, and startled at the difficulty of explaining to her

boy that it was her own flesh-and-blood sister, as near to her as Julius or Will to him, who thus met her, looked, and—would she pass by? 'I know her, Robert, but do not let us turn that way. She has seen me; she can come and speak to me if she chooses. It is your aunt, Mrs. Vanderdecken.'

'Oh!' said Bob, with difficulty repressing a whistle. 'What a stunning woman she is! But why doesn't she come and speak to you, mamma——'

'Hush, she is coming.'

She came, slow and stately, and held out her hand with a patronising air.

'You here, Edna? I thought you never went anywhere.'

'Oh, yes, I do sometimes, when my children carry me off with them. And you—who would have expected to find you here?'

'I came with my little girl. She is learning drawing under a celebrated artist—a lady artist of course, who brings her here once a-week or so to study the old masters. I leave them to go

round together, while I sit still. I don't care for pictures.'

Edna was silent.

'Besides I am rather glad to give the child something to amuse her, for she has been rather dull of late.'

'Not ill, I hope?'

'Oh, no, only cross. Do your children never take sullen or obstinate fits, Edna? and how do you contrive to manage them? I wish you could teach me how to manage mine;' and Mrs. Vanderdecken sighed.

While speaking, her distantly polite manner had changed into a sort of querulous appeal—Letty's old helplessness and habit of leaning upon everybody, especially her sister. She made room for Mrs. Stedman beside her with something of a sisterly air.

Now Edna and her husband, without much speaking, had tacitly made up their minds on the subject of the Vanderdeckens. They both felt that ties of blood, so far as the duty of showing kindness goes, are never abrogated,—but intimacy

is a different thing. To keep up a show of respect where none existe—of love when it has been long killed dead—is the merest folly, or worse, falsehood. The doctor's wife had not an atom of pride in her, and the condescending airs of her magnificent sister fell upon her perfectly harmless, almost unperceived; but Letty's total ignoring of the past, and meeting her, both on the two former occasions and to-day, as indifferently as if she were a common acquaintance, was such a mockery of kinship that Edna, who had believed in flesh-and-blood ties with the passionate fervour of all loving hearts—until they are forced into disbelief—drew back within herself, utterly repelled and wounded. Still, hearing that sigh, she said kindly,—

'Letty, if I can help or advise you, I would gladly do it. I have been a mother so many years now.'

'Ah, yes. How many children have you? I quite forget. But they are all boys. Now, I do think one girl is more trouble than half-a-dozen boys; at least, if she is such a self-willed

little puss as mine. I often tell Gertrude I wish when she was a baby I had broken that obstinate will of hers.'

'Don't say so,' replied Edna, earnestly; 'I like my children to have a will of their own. I would never break it, only guide it.'

'But do they obey you? Are they at all afraid of you? Gertrude is not one bit afraid of me.'

'Children that obey from fear mostly turn out either hypocrites or cowards. We rule ours by the pure sense of right. God's will, which we try to teach them, is the real will to be obeyed, far beyond either their father's or mine.'

'Ah, I can't understand you—I never could. But, Edna'—falling into the confidential tone of old days—'what would you do if one of your children had formed an acquaintance which you objected to, though you could not absolutely forbid it, and let you argue as you might with them they wouldn't give it up?'

'Robert,' whispered his mother, 'run back

and stay with your brothers for a little. I want to talk to your aunt.'

And Robert, though dying with curiosity, obeyed.

'There, your boy obeys you in a minute, Edna. Now I might reason with my girl for an hour on the subject of that horrid old soldier! But I will just tell you the whole matter.'

She drew closer to Mrs. Stedman, and in vexed and injured tones explained, in her own lengthy and contradictory fashion, how Gertrude had made acquaintance with some poor invalided soldier who lived in the village, had taken a great fancy to him, and now that he was laid up ill at his lodgings wanted to go and see him. When refused, she had sulked and fretted till she made herself quite ill.

'The child must have a tender heart,' remarked Edna.

'Of course she has, and I 'm sure I encourage it as much as possible. In her position she will have to be very charitable, so I always take her

with me on district-visiting, and put her name down below my own in subscription lists. But this is quite another matter. I told her I would give the poor man money, or send him his dinner every day, but as to her going to see him, it was quite impossible. Why, he lodges at a small public-house!'

'Is he a bad man, or a man of low character?'

'How do I know? soldiers often are. But to tell the plain truth'—the plain truth generally came out at the tail end of Mrs. Vanderdecken's confidences—'I don't like to say too much against him, for he certainly once saved the child's life—pulled her from under a railway train; and though I must own he has taken no advantage of this as yet, I mean in extorting money, still he might do so, and that would make Mr. Vanderdecken so angry.'

'Indeed! but you, I should have thought——'

'Ah, Edna, one isn't always a rich woman because one is married to a rich man. I have everything I want—can run up bills to any

amount, but—would you believe it?—I rarely have a sovereign in my pocket to do what I like with. Not that I think Mr. Vanderdecken means to be unkind, it 's just his way; the way of all men, I suppose.'

'Not all,' said Edna, and thought of her own open-handed Will, who trusted her with everything; who, like herself, never wantonly wasted a penny, and therefore had always an honest pound to spare for those who needed. And she looked with actual pity at her sister—so wealthy, yet so helplessly poor. 'Yes, I can see yours is not an easy position. But does the child still fret? What does her father say?'

'Oh, he knows nothing at all about it. We never tell papa anything. At least,' noticing Edna's intense surprise, 'we are obliged to be very careful what we tell him. You see, Edna, my marriage is not exactly like yours. I being so very much younger than Mr. Vanderdecken, and perhaps—well, perhaps, a little more taking in my appearance,' she smiled complacently, 'he is apt to be just a bit jealous. He cannot bear

the least reference to my old ties, which accounts for my not seeing as much of you, dear, as I might do.'

'I understand,' replied Edna, gravely.

'And to tell the whole truth,' it was dropping out bit by bit, 'if I were to say to him that that poor soldier came from Calcutta, as Gertrude informs me he did, my husband, who has never forgotten the—the rather peculiar circumstances of my marriage, would be quite furious. It's natural perhaps, but,' with a martyr-like sigh, 'of course it is a little awkward for me.'

'A little awkward!' Edna Stedman turned upon her sister full, steady, indignant eyes. 'A little awkward!' she repeated, and stopped.

And this was all that remained of the past; the terrible tragedy which even yet she and her husband could hardly bear to speak of; the agony of suspense which had darkened their life for months and years, until it was ended by receiving chance evidence which convinced them that Julius was not lost, but dead. His story was brief enough. On coming down to meet his betrothed at

the ship, and finding her gone—she having quitted it at the Cape of Good Hope to be married to Mr. Vanderdecken—he had suddenly disappeared.

Disappeared totally, leaving his lodgings just as they were—and lying on the table, in an envelope addressed to Messrs. Marchmont and Co., a brief holograph will, bequeathing everything he had to his brother, adding 'that he would never be heard of more.'

He never was. At first it was thought he might have committed suicide—gone voluntarily to face his Maker and ask Him the never-answered question of so many miserable lives; but when the news was communicated to Dr. Stedman, he refused to believe this. He thought rather that a fit of frantic despair had induced his brother to run away, so as to lose himself and his own identity for the time. So he instituted wide inquiries, and inserted advertisements in newspapers half over the world. But in vain.

At last Julius's Indian servant brought to the office of Marchmont & Co. an old coat of his master's, and a pocket-book, in which was written

'Julius Stedman.' Both these he said he had got from an English sailor, who took them from a drowned 'body,' quite unrecognisable, that had floated past his boat, down the Hooghly, three years before. How far the story was true, could never be proved, but in default of all other evidence it was at last accepted and believed.

So that was the end. After another year's clinging to desperate hope, the will was proved, the family put on mourning; and now for more than twelve years Julius Stedman had been numbered among the dead.

How much of all this Letty knew Edna could not say, she herself having told her only the final fact in a letter which was never answered. Yet when she looked at her sister and remembered Julius, whom she had so often watched sauntering about these very rooms with his beloved on his arm, Mrs. Stedman thought, Had Letty forgotten? Was it possible she could forget?

'Gertrude, you stupid child, don't you see how you are trampling on my dress?'

The peevish tone, the entire absorption in this

small annoyance of her little girl's rough but affectionate ways—yes, Letty had forgotten! All that fearful history of a ruined life—ruined by whose doing?—was regarded by her as 'a little awkward,' nothing more.

But it was useless to speak, or to feel, in the matter; indeed Edna was incapable of a word. She only drew her little niece to her side and caressed her, in that lingering, loving way with which she always looked at little girls now. And then lifting up her eyes, she saw entering the room, and glancing eagerly around in search of her, her husband.

'I had actually a spare hour this afternoon, Edna, so I thought I would follow you. Nurse told me where you were gone. I found the boys at once. Now, lads, off with you home, for it is growing dark. Mamma and I will just idle about for a little and drive home together.'

And Dr. Stedman sat down beside his Edna, with the air of a man who, after nearly a score of married years, still enjoys a stolen half-hour of his wife's company, and thinks her society the

pleasantest in the world. The lady sitting on her other side he never noticed at all.

Now Edna knew her husband well; his strong, faithful, tender heart, which yet, under all its tenderness, had a keen sense of right and wrong, honour and dishonour, that no warmth of friendship or nearness of blood could ever set aside. She was well aware how he felt regarding Letty, and dreaded, with a kind of sick dismay, any meeting between them. But there was no alternative; it must take place.

'William,' she said, touching his hand, 'this is my sister. You did not recognise her, I see.'

The blood rushed all over Dr. Stedman's face, and he stepped back a moment with uncontrollable repugnance. Then he seemed to remember that at least they were a man and woman—a gentleman and a lady. He bowed courteously, and when Letty offered him her hand he did not refuse it.

'I hope your husband is well? Is this your daughter?'

'Yes. Gertrude, shake hands with Dr. Stedman. She is a little like Edna, is she not?'

'Oh, no,' he replied hastily, 'oh, no!'

And this was all that passed.

For a minute or two more the three stood together, as they had stood so often on this very floor;—with a fourth, who was now—where? They must have thought of him, they could not but have done so, yet none of them gave the least sign. Alas! if we were all to speak out aloud concerning these ghastly memories that rise up at many a festive board, or walk beside us with soundless feet down many a noisy street, what good would it be? Better keep a decent silence, and go on patiently between the two awful companies, which are ever surrounding us—the seen and the unseen—the living and the dead.

Though all preserved their composure, the position was so painful that even Mrs. Vanderdecken perceived she had better end it.

'I must go now,' she said. 'Dr. Stedman, would you allow one of your boys to call up my carriage?'

'I will see you myself to it, Mrs. Vanderdecken.'

Coldly but courteously he offered her his arm, and they descended the staircase together.

Edna, hardly knowing what she was about, so like a dream did it all seem, wandered mechanically on, looking at the mute pictures round her, chiefly portraits of dead men and women, on whose faces were strange histories—the equal histories of living men and women now.

Pre-occupied as she was, she involuntarily stopped at one—Andrea Del Sarto's portrait of himself. Robert Browning must have had it in his mind when he painted that wonderful word-picture of Del Sarto and his wife, 'his beautiful Lucrezia, whom he loved.' All that sad story is plainly foreshadowed in the face—full of a man's passion and a woman's sensitiveness, perhaps also a woman's weakness, which looks out from the centuries-old canvas; a face, typical of the artist-nature, in all ages: often, too, foreboding the artist's fate.

While looking, and moralizing over it, Edna

suddenly recognised why the portrait had struck her with such a strange familiarity. It was almost as like him as if it had been painted from him—poor lost Julius!

She stood absorbed, for it seemed to speak to her with its sad soft eyes, out of the depths of years, when she felt a hand on her shoulder, and turned round to her husband.

'Edna, what were you looking at?'

'That head. Don't you see the strong resemblance?'

Dr. Stedman, less imaginative than his wife, might have passed it by, but the emotion in her countenance guided him at once. He too saw, as if it had risen up out of the grave, not Del Sarto's face, but his dead brother's, full of genius, life, and hope, whereon was no possible foreboding of the fate to come—a fate from which neither brother nor sister could save him.

Cain's appeal, 'Am I my brother's keeper?' though uttered by a murderer, is not wholly untrue or unjust. Beyond a certain point no human being can help or save another. We think we

can; we are strong and fearless, till taught in many a bitter and humbling way that we are poor and blind, weak and miserable, and that in God's hands alone are the spirits of all flesh, their guidance and their destinies.

But this is a hard lesson to learn. Edna saw, as she had seen many a time before during those heavy years when her husband went mourning for his brother—ay, at times even amidst the happiness of his most happy home—the sharp pain amounting almost to self-reproach, as if surely something had been left undone, or done unwisely, by him, else Julius's career would never have ended thus, in a grief the mystery of which was ten times worse than that of ordinary death.

She answered, as she sometimes ventured to do, the unspoken thoughts which by long experience she had learned to trace in William's mind, almost as accurately as if they were her own.

'Nay, dearest, you must not grieve. You could not help it—nor I. It was not our doing, and he is at rest now.'

'Yes, he is at rest. But—she?'

Will spoke beneath his breath—fiercely, too—so that his wife knew well enough how much, for her sake, he had suppressed during the last half-hour. Nor could she deny the truth—which he felt, though he did not utter it—that if ever a man's life was wasted and destroyed, it was that of poor Julius; and it had been Letty's doing. And yet—and yet—oh, if God reckoned up against us, not only the evil that we meant to do, but that which we have been either carelessly or foolishly instrumental in doing, where should any of us stand?

'Forgive her!' implored Edna, as some such thought as this passed through her mind,—she, the mother of five children, who had all these young hearts in her hand, as it were, and knew not how in the unseen years to come they might be sinned against or sinning—needing from others the pity or pardon which their mother was not there to show. 'Husband—forgive her! I think even Julius would do it now.'

'I'll try.'

Dr. Stedman pressed his wife's arm close to his heart, and abruptly turned away.

For a little while longer they wandered about the rooms, talking of indifferent topics, for Edna knew that there are some things too sore to be spoken much about, even between husband and wife; until the rare comfort of an idle hour together soothed them both, and made them feel, as married people do, that all trouble is bearable so long as each is left to the other. Perhaps even after then—for such love is not a mortal but an immortal possession.

Then they descended, arm in arm, to where, in the chilly dark of Trafalgar Square, the doctor's comfortable brougham was waiting.

'I am glad I have a warm, cosy carriage to put my darling into now,' said William, as he wrapped her well up, and, stepping in beside her, took her hand with lover-like tenderness.

Edna laughed—almost the laugh of her girlhood—to hide the fact of two big tears which came now as quickly to her eyes as they used to do then.

'Will, you are so conceited;' and then leaning against his shoulder—creeping as close to him as the propriety of Pall Mall allowed, she whispered, 'Oh, how happy we are—what a blessed life has been given to us—God make us thankful for it all.'

CHAPTER XXV.

GERTRUDE missed and fretted after her friend the soldier for many days. He and his stories had taken firm hold of her imagination, and his feebleness and sickliness, together with the fact of his having saved her life, had made a strong impression upon her fond little heart.

Being questioned, she had told her mother, as she always did when catechised, everything she was asked: so Mrs. Vanderdecken now knew all particulars regarding John Stone that were known to Gertrude herself. But this roused in her shallow and self-absorbed mind no suspicion beyond an uneasy feeling that her daughter's propensity for 'low' society—gardeners, keepers, and the common people generally—must be

stopped, and this was a good opportunity for doing it. So having ascertained, in a roundabout way, that Stone was still lying ill at the 'Goat and Compasses'—though not dying, nor likely immediately to die—she communicated these facts to Gertrude, and promised, in the half-and-half way in which the weak mother often pacified the strong-willed child, to send and inquire for him every day—in return exacting a promise that Gertrude would, on no account, demean herself by going personally to see him.

This precaution taken, the lady left the whole matter to chance, and troubled herself no more about it; Letitia Vanderdecken being, like Letty Kenderdine, one of the many people who never shut the stable-door until the steed is stolen.

But one luckless day, when she rolled away in her splendid carriage for a three hours' drive, her little daughter, having contrived to get rid of Nurse, went roaming the park in weary longing for something to do, something to play with—a permanent want with the rich man's daughter. At last, in a sort of despair, poor little Miss Van-

derdecken was driven to perch herself, like any common child, on the stile which divided Holywell Park from the furzy moor where she could watch, and envy not a little, the groups of common children who, just turned out of the school-house, were disporting themselves there.

It was one of those soft days, mild as spring, which had followed the breaking up of the frost, and the January sunshine, pale but sweet, slanted across the moorland like a sick man's smile. Crawling along like a fly upon a wall, and like herself, idly watching the school children, Gertrude perceived her friend John Stone.

Now, her mother had forbidden her to go and see him, and Gertrude always literally kept to her promises; but she had never promised not to speak to him if she met him; Mrs. Vanderdecken, who had heard, not without a vague sense of relief, that the sick man was not likely soon to get better, having never thought of providing against such a possibility. Consequently, the first thing the little maid did was to jump down from her stile and greet him in an

ecstasy of delight, at which Stone was much bewildered.

He must have been very ill, so ill as almost to confuse his mind, for he regarded the little red-cloaked elf as if he had never seen her before.

'I don't remember you. What do you want?'

Gertrude was a quick child, and possessed by instinct that precocious motherliness which some little girls show to all sick people whom they have to do with. She said gently,—

'Oh, I dare say you have forgotten me, you have been so ill. I am Gertrude Vanderdecken, —the little girl you used to tell stories to, and I have missed you so much.'

'Missed me? Is there anybody in the world who would have missed me?'

'Oh, yes, and I would have come and seen you had I been allowed, but mamma said——'

'Who is your mamma?' Then, as if memory came back in a sudden flash, overwhelming him and changing his dull apathy into that fierce,

half-insane look which always made the child shrink, though she was too ignorant to be much afraid. 'Oh, yes, I know, I remember. Go away, I want to get rid of you, of all belonging to you. Leave me; let me die quietly—quietly.'

He stopped, and fell into such a paroxysm of coughing that it left him quite exhausted. He found himself sitting on the stile, with the little girl holding his hand.

'You have not left me, child. I told you to go.'

'But I did not wish to go,' said Gertrude, who had been slowly making up her mind to a proceeding, daring indeed, and worthy of the tender romance which lay deep in her nature. She determined, henceforward, to take this poor sick man under her immediate protection, though in what way she did not quite know; and the first step was to get over her mother's violent prejudice against him. She thought if they could once meet, if her mamma could but talk with him quietly, his poor, worn, sickly face and shrunken figure, and, above all, the air of refine-

ment, which made him so different from the 'common people,' as Mrs. Vanderdecken called them, would make her as much interested in him as Gertrude was herself.

So she concocted a plan for a sudden and unexpected interview between the two—her mother and the poor soldier—which did her little brain considerable credit, and was almost as romantic as the stories she read, or those she was in the habit of making 'out of her own head.'

'This is far too cold a place for you to sit in,' said she, demurely. 'Come with me, and I'll take you to our winter garden, where you'll find it so warm; almost like being in India.'

'Oh!' said Stone, shivering, 'if I could only get warm. I feel as if I should never be warm again;' and the impulse of physical suffering, which seemed uppermost in him now, added to that state of weakness in which a sick person can be persuaded by anybody to anything, made him submit to Gertrude's guidance, almost in spite of himself. She took him by the hand and led him across the park; but when they came in

sight of the white, stone-fronted, handsome house, she stopped.

'Is your mother there?'

'I think not; she is out driving—at least she was out.'

'No prevarication; no weak deceptions; you'll learn them soon enough. Where is your mother?'

'I don't know,' said the child, boldly, 'and if I did I wouldn't tell you, for you look as if you meant to be rude to her, and you ought not, for she has never done you any harm, and would be very kind to you if she knew you—I am sure she would. She is exceedingly charitable to——' poor people, Gertrude was going to say, but stopped.

'Exceedingly charitable! A most amiable, generous lady—quite a Lady Bountiful! And that is the house she lives in; whence she would kindly throw a crumb or two to a poor wretched fellow like me, or if I myself laid down at her gate she would send her lap-dog out to lick my sores. Excellent—excellent!'

Gertrude was no coward, or she might have been frightened at the way the man talked and looked. But when she set her mind upon doing a thing, she rarely let it slip undone.

'Come,' she said, taking firm hold of his hand again, 'don't talk, talking is bad for you. Just come with me into the winter garden.' And he came.

It was one of those floral palaces, originated by Sir Joseph Paxton, and now often to be seen in the domains of our merchant-princes, who, like Mr. Vanderdecken, seldom enjoy or appreciate, but only pay for them. Under a high circular glass dome grew fresh, as if in their native clime, all sorts of tropical bulbs—palms, bananas, and so on—while ranged round in that exquisite art, which knows its best skill is to imitate nature, was a mass of flowering-plants, which burst upon the eye in such a glory of form and colour as to transform January into June.

When, the instant Gertrude opened the door, the moist, warm, perfumed atmosphere greeted

Stone's delicate senses, he drank it in with a deep breath of delight.

'Truly this feels like what Mrs. Fox would call "another and a better world," which a week since I was supposed to be going to. I wish I were there now.'

'Where?' asked Gertrude, innocently.

'In heaven, if there be such a place. Do you think there is, child?'

She looked puzzled, half shocked, and answered, a little primly, 'Mamma says we ought not to talk about those sort of things except on Sundays.'

'Ha, ha! Of course not. What should she know about heaven any more than I? But tell her, when she gets there, as no doubt she will, being such a very benevolent lady—tell her to look over the gates of it at me, frying slowly, down in the other place.'

Here, catching Gertrude's horrified look, Stone paused, struck by the same vague compunction which makes the profligate hold his tongue before an innocent girl, or the drunkard

snatch from a young boy's hand the accursed glass.

'Never mind me: I was talking nonsense. I often do. My head is not quite right. I wish somebody would put it right.' And he sighed, in that sad helplessness which went to the very bottom of the little maiden's heart.

She planned, with the quickness of lightning, the rest of her scheme.

'I know somebody who would cure you at once. Did you ever go to see him, as you said you would—Aunt Edna's husband, Dr. Stedman?'

Stone sprang up from the easy garden-chair where the child had placed him, and glared round him with the eye of a hunted animal.

'Don't speak about him! don't remind me of him, or tell him of me! Let me go! I am a poor, lost, miserable man, that only wants to lay him down and die in any quiet corner, out of everybody's reach. I have changed my mind now: I'll promise to harm nobody, punish nobody; only let me die!'

'But I don't want you to die,' said Gertrude,

upon whose childish ignorance two-thirds of his wild talk fell quite harmlessly—considered, as he said, to be mére 'nonsense.' 'If you went to Dr. Stedman he would make you well. I am certain he would, for I have seen him myself now, and he looks so clever and so kind. I would go and tell him or Aunt Edna all about you, only something happened last week.'

'What happened? Any of them dead?'

'Oh, no!'

'That's right. They must live and be happy. Nobody ought to die, except me; and I cannot. Oh, that I could! I am so tired, so tired!'

He looked up at the child, as she stood over him, in her precocious womanly protectingness. Her little firm face trembled, but only with pity. She was not one bit irresolute or afraid.

'It is great nonsense talking about dying,' said the little maid, imperatively. 'You are not nearly so old as papa, and I won't let him die for many years yet; for I love him dearly, and he is very good to me, even though he was cross at that thing which happened.'

'What was it?'

'Perhaps I ought not to tell you. Mamma said I had better not talk about it, it was not respectable to have coolness between relations: but one day when we were in London we met the Stedmans—Aunt Edna and her husband, and all the boys; and when I told papa, for he asked me, as he always does, where I had been and whom I had seen, and, of course, I was obliged to speak the truth—wasn't I, now?—he was excessively angry, and told mamma he would not let his little girl have anything to do with them, for he hated the very name of Stedman.'

'Why? Did he say why?'

'I think, because of that uncle I told you about,—the poor man who was drowned. He must have known about him, and disliked him, for he began speaking of him to mamma, abusing him very much. He called him a penniless, worthless fellow, and said everybody must have been glad when he died.'

'Everybody glad when he died!' repeated Stone beneath his breath.

'Papa said it, and mamma seemed to think so too; but then she never dares contradict papa when he is in one of his passions. Still, for all that,' continued Gertrude, chattering, and as if glad to have out in words what she seemed to have been deeply thinking about, 'I can't get the poor man out of my head. I feel so sorry for him. He might not have been a very bad man, or would have grown better if he had had anybody to be kind to him. But away from his brother and Aunt Edna, living out there in India quite alone, with nobody to take care of him or be fond of him, what could he do?'

'Children and fools speak truth,' cried Stone, violently. 'But I've heard enough. What does it matter? He is dead now—dead and forgotten. What's the use of prating about him?'

Gertrude turned upon the soldier the wondering reproach which Nature—no, Heaven—often puts into the innocence of children's eyes:—'Why, do not you too feel sorry for the poor man?'

'Sorry? Not I. There is a saying, "As you

make your bed, you must lie upon it." He did. But no! he did not make it: it was made for him—full of briers and thorns and stinging serpents. A wicked woman did it all!'

Gertrude opened her eyes in the utmost astonishment.

'Should you like to hear about her, child? It would be a pretty tale—a very pretty tale—as interesting as any you ever heard. And you could tell it to your mother afterwards. Ay, tell her—tell her. That is a grand idea! I wonder I never thought of it before.'

Stone's whole frame quivered with excitement as he spoke; but Gertrude's own curiosity was too eager for her to notice his agitation much.

'Oh, do tell me—I should so like to know! But how did you come to know about him—this Julius Stedman—was not that his name?'

'Yes,' answered Stone slowly. 'Julius Stedman—that was his name. He was the friend—of a friend of mine.'

'And what was he like? Did you ever see him?—with your very own eyes?'

Stone paused again ere he answered, with a queer sort of smile, 'No, I never saw him.'

Then, regaining forcibly his self-possession, he began, and in his old fashion—he had in a remarkable degree the artist faculty of graphic narration—he told, as vividly as any of his other stories, the story of the young painter and the beautiful lady with whom he was so passionately in love.

Nature stirs in a child's heart, often, sooner than we think: there are very few little maidens of twelve who cannot understand and appreciate a love-story. Gertrude listened, intensely interested.

'And was she very beautiful? As beautiful as—' the child stopped for a comparison—'as mamma?'

Stone laughed.

'You may laugh!' said Gertrude, rather angrily, 'but mamma was once very beautiful. Everybody says so; and she has lots of portraits of herself, done when she was young — only she keeps them locked up in a drawer, for papa cannot

bear the sight of them. But they are so lovely, you don't know! Mamma must have been quite as handsome as that lady—what was her name?'

'What is your mamma's name?'

'Letitia; but I heard Aunt Edna call her Letty.'

The soldier dropped his head within his hands. Some ghostly memory, sweet as the hyacinth-breaths beside him, which every spring comes freshly telling us of many a spring departed—dead, and yet for ever undying—must have swept over him, annihilating everything but the delusive, never-to-be-forgotten dream of passionate love. He said to the child—the child so utterly unlike her mother, that her flesh-and-blood presence affected him less than this accidental word—

'Not Letty. No, we'll not call her Letty. It was such a pretty name—such a sweet, dear name! And she was a wicked woman, as I said. She murdered him!'

Gertrude drew back, horrified.

'I don't mean that she killed him bodily—with a pistol or a dagger. But there are other ways of murdering a man besides these. I'll tell you how she did it. And you'll not forget, child?—you'll tell it, word for word, to your mother, some day?'

'Oh, yes,' said Gertrude, and again bent all her mind to listen.

It was a touching story, even to a child. How, far away in India, the young man had worked—at work he did not care for—to make a home for his betrothed bride; how he had strained his means to the utmost, that she should have therein every luxury she could care for ('She liked luxuries—pretty clothes, handsome jewellery,' said Stone, in parenthesis); and how, almost beside himself with happiness, he had gone down to the ship to meet her—his all but wife—his very, very own.

'And she came?' cried Gertrude, breathless with emotion.

'The ship came,' said Stone, in a cold, hard voice. 'She was not there.'

Gertrude almost sobbed. 'Was she—was she dead?'

'Oh, no! only married!'

And then he related, in a few sharp, biting words—for his breath seemed almost gone—how, on the voyage, a rich man had fallen in love with her—('She was so very beautiful, you know!'),—and she had landed at a port half-way, where his estate was, and married him.

'What a wicked, wicked woman! I hate her!' And as she said this, Gertrude clenched her little hand. Tears—those holy childish tears which burst out irrepressibly at any story of cruelty or wrong—fell thick and fast; and her whole frame was trembling with more than sorrow—indignation. 'I hate her!'

Stone had said, Revenge was sweet. He tasted it fully now. But the taste could not have been quite so sweet as he expected; for, instead of exulting over it, he rather drew back.

'Hush, child!—don't say you hate her!'

'But she was wicked—you told me so.'

'If I did you need not say it. Children cannot understand these things.'

And a strange remorse came over him—the childless man—for having put into any daughter's hand a weapon that might pierce her mother to the heart. He had not thought of this at first: he had thought only of revenge—revenge, no matter how, or by what means—but now, when he heard the child's words, and saw her little face glowing with righteous wrath, he shrank back from the fire his own hands had kindled.

'Stop a minute,' he said. 'The world might not judge her so harshly. Many people would say, she had only made a prudent marriage: and that the man—her lover—if he had any manhood in him, ought to have got over it, lived an honest life, and died beloved and respected.'

'But he did die: he was drowned, I know. Where was it?—how?'

Stone could not answer. Even a hardened liar might have been staggered by the accusing earnestness of the child's eyes. And this man, once so gentle—who, however often sinning, never

sinned without repenting—he knew not what to do; until, whether for good or ill, fate interposed.

Fate, sweeping along in the purple silken robes and white ermine mantle of Mrs. Vanderdecken herself.

'Gertrude! Bless me! My dear Gertrude!'

No wonder, perhaps, at the reproving sharpness of the lady's tone. It was a trial. To see—sitting in her beautiful conservatory, and beside her very own daughter—a man, not merely one of the 'lower orders,' as she termed them, but the very man for whom, from being indebted to him for an unpaid kindness (weak people so shrink from the burden of gratitude!) she had conceived as much repugnance as her easy nature was capable of feeling. The more, as he paid her none of the almost servile respect which Mrs. Vanderdecken was accustomed to receive from her inferiors; made no attempt to rise or bow, did not even take off his hat, but sat doggedly there, staring at her. Once, as her voice, and the rustle of her dress, reached his ears, he shivered. It

might have been a blast of cold air from the opened door, or else—who knows?—some breath that the still beautiful woman had brought with her from the rose-gardens of his passionate youth —those lost love-roses, of which, though form and colour have been obliterated in dusty death, the perfume never wholly dies.

As to Mrs. Vanderdecken, all she beheld was a shabby-looking, bearded man, with a pair of gleaming eyes, which looked as if they would burn her up; devouring all her grace and grandeur, though without—and she felt this, dull as she was—without having the slightest awe of either.

'Gertrude,' she said, uneasily, 'who is this—this person?'

'Mamma, don't you remember him? Mr. Stone—whom Bran bit—who was so good to me. He has been very, very ill, and I brought him in here because it is so nice and warm. He likes warmth—he has just come from India, you know.'

'Oh, indeed,' said Mrs. Vanderdecken carelessly.

Gertrude whispered in earnest entreaty, 'Mamma, please speak to him—be a little kind to him.'

'I am sure, my dear, I am always ready to show kindness to any poor people who need it, and especially to poor people in whom you are interested. But, really, you sometimes choose such extraordinary sort of folk to make friends with, and show your charity in such an unsuitable way! In this instance'—and her cold eye wandered carelessly over the shabby soldier, and she spoke with the tone of dignified rebuke which she was in the habit of using to the drunkards and slatterns of her district—'You must perceive, my good man, that for you to meet Miss Vanderdecken in this way, and let her bring you into our own private domains, is quite unpardonable. In fact'—growing more angry under the absolute silence of her hearer—'I consider it a most impertinent intrusion, and desire that it may never occur again.'

'Mamma—oh, mamma!' pleaded Gertrude; but Stone took no notice whatever. He sat, as

if in a dream, staring blankly at Mrs. Vanderdecken.

The lady at last grew a little uncomfortable, so fixed was the gaze, so impassive the attitude of this strange fellow, who seemed to exercise over Gertrude a perfect fascination.

'Come in, child—tea has been waiting this half-hour, and I have to dress. You forget we have a dinner party to-night. For you,' turning to Stone, 'as my daughter says you are an invalid, I will overlook your rudeness—for once; and since she is kind enough to take an interest in you, I shall be glad to assist you—with soup tickets, or out of my village clothing fund, if you will give me your name and address; also—I always exact this—a certificate of character.'

'No!' thundered out the broken-down man, confronting the elegant rich woman. 'I'll give you nothing—I'll accept nothing from you. Let me go.'

He rose, and staggered past her, then turned, and seeing her left hand hanging down—white, glittering with many rings—he seized it, regarded

it a minute, crushed it in his own with a fierce pressure, and flung it away.

Mrs. Vanderdecken gave a little scream, but the conservatory door had closed, and he was gone. Then her indignation, not unmixed with fear, burst out.

'Gertrude, this *protégé* of yours is the rudest fellow I ever saw—a perfect boor. A thief too! for I am certain he meant to rob me. Didn't you see him make a snatch at my rings? I wonder if they are safe—one, two, three—yes, all right. What a mercy! Only think if he had stolen these beautiful diamonds.'

'Mamma!' cried Gertrude, half in reproach, half in entreaty, for she did not know what to say. Undoubtedly the poor soldier had been very rude, and yet she could not believe him to be a thief. But all her little plan had fallen to the ground. She saw her mother was seriously displeased, and her common sense told her it was not without cause. The poor child thought she would never try romantic schemes for doing people good again.

Perplexed and miserable, she walked by her mother's side into the house, where she received her cup of tea, and the severe scolding which accompanied it, with a sad humility, and then waited beside Mrs. Vanderdecken while she dressed for a dinner-party. The little plain child had an ardent admiration for her mamma's beauty, and while she was meditatively watching the maid comb out those masses of long light hair, in which there was scarcely a grey thread visible, Mrs. Vanderdecken, chancing to turn round, saw her little girl's earnest looks, and smiled, mollified.

'Come, my dear,' said she, holding out her hand, 'I'll not scold you any more. We will be the best of friends, if only you promise to have nothing more to do with that ruffianly soldier.'

'But I can't promise; and he isn't a ruffian, indeed,' said Gertrude, piteously, yet very decidedly. She was an obstinate little thing, and had a trick of always holding fastest to her friends when they happened to be down in the world. 'You would not say so, mamma, if you once

heard him talk as he talks to me—as he had been talking all this afternoon.'

'All the afternoon!' cried the mother in dismay; 'a young lady like you to be talking a whole afternoon with a low fellow like him! It's dreadful to think of. I am perfectly ashamed of you. What on earth were you talking about? Tell me every word, I command you!'

Here Gertrude became much perplexed. Somehow or other, whenever she spoke of the Stedmans, she had always got into trouble with either father or mother, or both; and so she had resolved in that strong reserved little heart of hers, to shut them up tight there, and never refer to any of them again. She had kept this resolution so well that, in spite of the charming excitement of this afternoon's discovery concerning poor Uncle Julius, for the last half-hour she had borne her mamma's reproaches in perfect silence, nor let herself be betrayed into the slightest allusion to the story which had interested her so much. Now, being plainly questioned, she was obliged to speak out.

'I'll tell you anything you choose, mamma,' said she, sullenly, 'but I know it will only make you cross. I was hearing a long story about a person whom neither you nor papa like, and whom you told me never to speak about, and I wouldn't speak, if you didn't ask me.'

'What nonsense, child! Who was it?'

'Uncle Stedman's brother—Julius.'

Had a ghost risen up before her, Mrs. Vanderdecken could not have been more startled. Her very lips whitened as she said,—

'There must be some mistake. Gertrude, how could you possibly know——'

'Of course I know, mamma. Didn't I hear you and papa talking about him? and didn't you yourself tell me who he was, and that he was drowned? I know all about him now,' added the child, with childish conceit. 'Mr. Stone told me his whole story.'

'His whole story?'

'Yes, mamma, about his being an artist when he was young, and his falling in love with a beautiful lady, and his giving up painting and going

to India to make a fortune for her sake; how she promised to come out to him and marry him; how——'

'Stop, child!' interrupted Mrs. Vanderdecken, with a subdued and even frightened air, 'please don't go chattering on so fast. I can't attend to you. Wait till I am dressed. Take your book and be quiet for a little.'

Gertrude obeyed, yet still cast furtive glances at her mother, who arranged her dress, and clasped her ornaments in a hurried, absent manner, quite unusual for one who was generally so particular about these things.

'Mamma, what is the matter with you? Are you ill? You look so white.'

'Nonsense, child.'

No more passed until the maid was dismissed, and the lady sat down on the sofa by the fire, her toilet complete, and an especially resplendent toilet it was; but, for once, it proved no consolation to her.

Mrs. Vanderdecken was very nervous; nervous was the word, not startled, or shocked, or grieved,

but merely frightened. A vague apprehension seized her of something going to happen. Was it because, after this long safe blank of many years, somebody had turned up who knew something of her past life, or merely because of the surprise of hearing from her little daughter's lips that once familiar name? True, it was only a name. Julius Stedman was dead, and could not harm her. Living he might, or she fancied so, being a coward in her heart, and knowing well her husband's jealous temper, nurtured by that faint fear similar to the one which Brabantio first puts into the mind of Othello—

> 'Look to her, Moor; have a quick eye to see;
> She has deceived her father, and may thee.'

For—such is human nature, and so surely does fate take its revenge—it had been one of the troubles in Mrs. Vanderdecken's married life, to be not seldom taunted for her broken pledge by the very man for whom she had broken it. Mr. Vanderdecken of course had known all about Julius Stedman at the time, but being desper-

ately in love, he had seen in her falseness to one man no obstacle to her marriage with another, since that other happened to be himself. Afterwards, when his passion had cooled down into the indifference that was sure, at best, to be the out-come of such a marriage, he despised his wife, and took care to let her see that he did, for doing that which he himself had persuaded her to do. It was natural, perhaps; and still, poor woman! it was rather hard.

'Gertrude,' she said, turning with a helpless appeal to her child, who, thinking still that she was not well, had stolen up to her, and taken her hand; 'Gertrude, you must not vex your poor mother, who has nobody to be a comfort to her but you. You must make her your chief companion, and tell her everything, instead of taking queer fancies for old soldiers and such-like.'

'But, mamma, I never take any fancies that make me forget you,' said the little girl, earnestly. 'And that story, it was no secret. He said I might tell it you whenever I liked'

'Did he? Who is he? Oh, you mean the

man John Stone! Didn't you tell me that was his name? Did he ever know that—that person?'

'Uncle Stedman's brother, whom you dislike so? No: he told me he had never met him in his life.'

Mrs. Vanderdecken breathed freer. Struck with a vague apprehension, she had been beating about the bush, afraid, and yet most anxious to find out how much her daughter knew; but now she ventured to say, carelessly, taking out her watch,—

'I have just ten minutes left. You may tell me the story if you like, and if it amuses you.'

'It wasn't at all amusing, mamma. I think it was the saddest story I ever heard. Just listen.'

And then, with the vividness with which Stone's words had impressed it on her mind, and with a childish simplicity that added to its touchingness, she repeated, almost literally, what she had just heard.

Her mother listened, too much startled, nay,

terrified, to interrupt her by a word. The whole history was accurate down to the remotest particulars, facts so trifling that it seemed impossible for any stranger to have heard them, nay, they had escaped her own memory, till revived like invisible writing, by being thus brought to light in such an unforeseen and overwhelming manner. It seemed as if an accusing angel spoke to her from the lips of her own child; as if after all this lapse of years and change of circumstances, the sins of her youth, which she had glossed over and palliated, and almost believed to be no sin at all, because no punishment had ever followed them, rose up and confronted her. Also, her condemnation came from the one creature in the world whom she loved dearly, purely, and unselfishly—her only child.

'Was she not a wicked woman, mamma?' said Gertrude, lifting up her glowing face and looking straight into her mother's. 'After she had made him miserable so long, first pretending she liked him, then to change her mind and refuse him? When she had at last faithfully promised

to marry him, and he was expecting her, and was so happy, to break her word, and go and marry another man!'

'Who was the man?' asked the mother, in an agony of dread. 'Did—did he tell you the name?'

'No; only that he was rich and Mr. Stedman was poor. That was why she did it. Wasn't it a wicked, cruel thing? Oh, mamma,' cried Gertrude, in a burst of indignation, 'if ever, when I grow up, I were to meet that lady, I should hate her. I know I should. I couldn't help it.'

Mrs. Vanderdecken shivered. All through her fineries—her silks, and laces, and jewels, she shivered; and clutched the hand of her little daughter as if she were drowning—like that poor drowned Julius—and her child's affection were the only plank to which she clung.

But soon every other feeling was absorbed in apprehension—the overpowering, irrational terror which seizes upon all weak natures when brought face to face with a difficulty, the extent of which their cowardice momentarily exaggerates. There-

fore, she did, what such folks generally do, she adopted the line of pacification and deprecation.

'Gertrude, my dear, I am glad you have told me this story. It is exceedingly interesting, and it was kind of you to be so sorry for the poor man. Perhaps he never meant to rob me, only just to look at my diamonds. I wonder how he came to know these facts, if they are facts. Did he tell you anything more?'

'No, mamma.'

'I should almost like to speak to him myself. He might have heard particulars which the family would be glad to know.'

'Oh, mamma, if only you would see him! May I go to him and tell him you will?'

'No, no,' said Mrs. Vanderdecken, hastily. 'Not upon any account, my dear. Don't go near him, and if you meet him promise me—Hark! isn't that your father?'

And the sound of heavy boots coming upstairs made her, not wince and look annoyed as was her wont, but actually tremble.

'Gertrude,' she cried in an agony, 'promise

me that you will not breathe a word to your father of all this?'

'Very well, mamma,' said Gertrude, greatly puzzled, and a little vexed; but she was used to her mother's feeblenesses and inconsistencies, and had learned to regard them with a patience not wholly unallied to contempt.

Yet she was fond of her, and when, ere her dismissal, she got a warmer kiss than usual, Gertrude went away quite happy.

Not so Mrs. Vanderdecken. Out of the smooth surface of her dull easy life had risen up a great fear. Avenging Fate, whipping her with the cruellest scourge by which wrong-doing is ever punished, had humiliated her before, and caused her to stand in actual dread of, her own child.

CHAPTER XXVI.

MRS. VANDERDECKEN'S alarm and uneasiness did not abate, as she hoped it would. In the pauses of her dinner-party, while smiling upon everybody and doing the honours of her splendid establishment, to all the 'best' people of her acquaintance —it stood behind her velvet chair, ghost-like, and would not be driven away. Not though the blessings surrounding her were real and tangible — plate, and furniture, and elegant dresses; polite neighbours treating her with the utmost consideration and attention, as was due to the pleasant and lady-like millionnaire's wife who had come into their circle; while the things she dreaded were faint and shadowy, belonging to a period in her

life which she would fain have swept away into total oblivion.

She said to herself many times, How ridiculous it was to be so afraid! As if nobody besides herself had once been a governess, or had had a poor lover whom she had given up for a rich one! Why, such things happened every day; and if this disreputable fellow, Stone, had known something of Julius Stedman, was that any reason that the mistress of Holywell Hall should trouble herself about him? A five-pound note, no doubt, would settle the matter, and get him away from Mrs. Fox's, perhaps induce him to quit the neighbourhood; where he could only have come for the purpose of extorting money. But five pounds to the elegant wife of the miserly Mr. Vanderdecken was as unattainable as if it had been five thousand.

As she pondered, smiling all the while sweetly on her right-hand neighbour, Sir Somebody Something, Stone's face, haggard, wild, and sad—yet certainly not that of a mercenary impostor—rose up before her threateningly, and

once or twice that evening, when a gentleman named casually the 'Goat and Compasses,' she felt herself grow hot with fear, lest some fatality should bring into the conversation the names she dreaded; John Stone or—Julius Stedman.

She woke next morning with the feeling of 'something going to happen' stronger than ever; and, as was her nature, the more her fear pursued her the farther she tried to flee from it. All day she avoided being left alone with her daughter, and did not venture once to refer to the subject of the Indian soldier. For, when she came to consider it, her plan of seeing him herself became difficult. What was she to say to him? How question him about poor Julius without betraying that this story, which had so oddly come to his knowledge, was the last which she would have desired to have repeated to her daughter, or to any of her neighbours? In truth, to try and stop the man's mouth seemed more dangerous than letting him alone. It would be horrible if he should recognise in her—Mrs. Vanderdecken—the woman who had so acted that even Gertrude, her

own little Gertrude, called her 'a wicked woman, and declared she 'hated' her.

Alas, there was the sting, or else it was Heaven's finger of light touching Letty's foolish, vain heart. More than her husband's anger, her neighbours' gossip, she dreaded the condemnation and contempt of her child. It seemed as if now for the first time the errors of her youth took their true aspect, merely from the dread she had lest her daughter should hear of them; and looking back on her past, she knew what its blanks and misdoings must must have been, by the longing she had that Gertrude's life might not be like her own.

Two days afterwards came Sunday, and still nothing had occurred, and the mother had managed so that not a word had passed between her and Gertrude respecting John Stone. She had almost contrived to persuade herself that the man was got rid of entirely, when, coming into church, she saw him sitting in the free seats beside Mrs. Fox, as on the first day, and watching the Vanderdecken pew with those fierce eyes of his, which

he never removed during the whole service. Mrs. Vanderdecken shivered under them, and looked another way. Church being over, she hurried out; but though he did not attempt to speak, or to interfere with them in any way, he followed them silently to their very carriage door.

From that time every Sunday the man was in his place, and many a week-day when she drove out she saw him hanging about on the common, or near the lodge-gates, watching, she fancied, for her carriage to pass. But Sundays were the worst. Then, the church being free to all, she could not escape. Nobody could hinder his coming, nor order him to change his seat; so there he sat, staring at her, not with admiration, and still less with impertinence, but with a cold, blighting contempt that was almost a malediction. She felt as if he haunted her—that miserable man—whom she thought sometimes she must have seen before, yet could not remember when or where.

For Mrs. Vanderdecken was not a woman of imagination. An accepted fact she never thought of contradicting or disbelieving. To doubt that

Julius Stedman was dead, or that John Stone, who knew so much about him, might possibly be himself, was a flight of fancy far beyond her. Besides, she never liked to face unpleasant things, and it was sufficiently difficult to have to put off from time to time Gertrude's earnest entreaties with the promise that 'she would see the poor fellow by and bye.'

This sort of life went on for several weeks, and Gertrude's tender heart being pacified by the sight of her friend every Sunday, she had almost ceased to worry her mother about him, when a small chance raised in Mrs. Vanderdecken's mind a new alarm.

Though she never looked towards the man, and tried hard not to see him, still one Sunday morning she did see him, drawing his thin hand wearily through his scanty grey hair and abundant beard. It was a remarkable hand, and hands often keep their individuality when time has changed all else. It startled Mrs. Vanderdecken by its likeness to one which, in the days of her girlhood, had so often clasped hers.

What if it were possible—if this wretched, disreputable soldier could be her old lover, not dead after all? She had been sorry for his death, but had never had courage to ask particulars about it, and beyond Edna's brief communication by letter, that he had been 'drowned,' of the circumstances of his end she knew nothing. During their three short interviews the sisters had never once mentioned Julius's name.

Now, Letty thought, if she could only find out exactly when and where and how he died, it would be a comfort and protection to her. Protection against what? She could not tell. She only knew, that with this continual dread upon her mind, with the figure of that shabby man, whoever he was, pursuing her constantly, her life was a daily burden to her. The trifling annoyance had grown into a perpetual and morbid fear.

To throw it off she determined one morning, without telling Gertrude, to go to London, and find out as much as she could from her sister Edna.

It is a strange thing, and sad too, but sisters do sometimes come to meet as these sisters met; with mere courtesy—no more; to call one another, as these did, by their married names—'Mrs. Vanderdecken,' 'Mrs. Stedman,' and to sit amiably conversing together on indifferent topics like any other ordinary acquaintances. Alas, their fates had drifted them apart, as brothers and sisters will drift, when there exists between them no real sympathy, no tie stronger than the mere natural instinct of flesh and blood. That may remain, and duty keeps it alive in a measure, still it is only the mummy of love which they dress up in decent clothes for the world to look at. The soul of love—deep, close, fraternal love—has fled for ever.

So it is, and must always be. Better accept the fact as Edna accepted it, and received civilly her sister's civil call, though internally thankful that her husband was out, and that none of her children were at hand to see into what the sororal bond can degenerate, under given circumstances and with certain characters.

And yet she was sorry for Letty, and when—her grand, patronising manner, and her air of extreme condescension, as she examined the 'little pokey house,' having slightly worn off,—Mrs. Vanderdecken betrayed unconsciously her inward troubles, though in a round-about, irrelevant fashion, Edna felt more sorry still.

'Was that what you came to speak to me about?' said she, with her usual directness. 'Yes, it must be a great grief, to have your child setting up for independent actions, making disreputable acquaintances, and persisting in them after you have forbidden them entirely.'

'But I have not done that, not exactly, for I doubt if I could make her obey me.'

'There I think you are wrong,' answered Edna, in her quick, decided way, which made the people who did not like her—no person is liked by everybody—say she was too much given to preaching. 'I would lay upon children as few restrictions and commands as possible; but those made must be rigidly enforced. And for that low fellow, who, from what you say, is probably

no soldier at all, but an impertinent beggar, I would never allow Gertrude to exchange another word with him.'

'Do you think so? I wish I could do it; I wish I dared.'

'Dared! What, dare you not do an unpleasant thing for the good of your own child?'

'It isn't that, Edna, not quite; but I will explain the matter another time,' said Letty, hurriedly, finding that it was impossible to get a true answer to the false impression which she had somehow contrived to give, and now felt difficult to remove. 'I'm sick of the subject, let us talk about something else. What a fine young fellow is that eldest boy of yours! I met him at the door going out with his brother.'

'Will and Julius are constant companions. I hope they will grow up the same, and be friends as well as brothers. It is so sometimes, though not always,' said Edna, with a slight sigh. 'Their father and I often look at them with a full heart, and wonder what their future will be. For Julius we have no fear. You remember how

healthy he was—so good and sweet-tempered, even as a baby.'

'Yes,' said Letty, with a little return of her stiff manner.

'But Will—the boys ought to have changed names, I think—Will is so delicate, so sensitive, in many things so strangely, painfully like——'

Edna stopped.

Mrs. Vanderdecken felt that now or never was her chance, if she wanted to find out anything about her old lover, and her desperate anxiety to be free from the doubt which had lately come, made her bolder than usual.

'Yes, Will is likely to give you some uneasiness. He does not look strong, as if he had something of that family weakness—was it consumption, or what?—which showed itself so plainly in poor dear Julius.'

'Poor dear Julius!' He had sunk to that, uttered in the half-pitying, half-indifferent tone in which dead people, whose death is felt to be rather a gain than a loss to their friends, come to be spoken of sometimes.

'And, by-the-bye,' continued Mrs. Vanderdecken, seeing that Mrs. Stedman remained quite silent, 'I have often wished to ask you, did you get that full information which you were in search of when you wrote me the fact—the mere fact—of his death in India?'

'Yes,' replied Edna, in a grave, constrained tone. 'We have, alas! no reason to doubt his death; though at first we had, and it was a long time before we could reconcile ourselves to believe it.'

'What!' cried Letty, turning pale; 'was he not dead after all? I thought he was drowned in the Hooghly?'

'We supposed so, but his body was not found, and so we hoped he might be yet alive; had gone up the country, or sailed to Australia, or perhaps come direct home to England, and then shrunk from finding us out—but I will not trouble you with these matters.'

'It's no trouble. Please tell me. I should like to hear.'

And though Mrs. Vanderdecken testified no

distressing emotion—indeed the absolute fact that Julius was dead proved such a relief to her that she could speak about him without any hesitation—still she looked sad and grave, rather touched than not.

'Do tell me all about him, Edna. Poor fellow! I did not mean him any harm. I had no notion he would have taken it so much to heart. Please tell everything.'

And she listened, not without feeling, while Edna did tell her 'everything:' down to the miserable ending of that life, whose blessing she might have been, instead of its fatality and its curse.

'Poor fellow!—poor fellow!' said Letty, sobbing a good deal. 'And was he really not seen after that day when he went to the ship and found me gone?'

'Never. We advertised for him half over the world; the advertisements could not but have reached him somewhere, if alive. And he would have come home to us; I am sure he would. He knew how we loved him.'

'It must have been very painful,' said Mrs. Vanderdecken. 'And so ——'

'And so, after two years of suspense, we got the evidence I told you of. And some months later we received his pocket-book, with his name written inside it, which he always carried about with him, for it held'—she hesitated—'it held a lock of your hair. It is all we have left of him. Would you like to see it?'

'I think I should,' said Letty, in a low tone.

'Then come up-stairs.'

Letty followed to her sister's bed-room—a sacred room, consecrated by both birth and death; a mother's room, where several toys strewn about showed that the children had still free admittance into its precincts. But there was no baby in the house now, and the little crib which had been occupied successively so many years, was removed from its place beside the bed and exiled into a far corner, to be used as a receptacle for spare blankets and other extraneous things. The room and all its appointments were comfortable

enough, but well worn and a little old-fashioned, as if long after the need for economy was gone, her love for the familiar objects made Mrs. Stedman averse to any change in her apartment.

'That is your old dressing-table, and the wardrobe too. I could almost fancy myself back in the small house—where was it? I forget—that you lived in when first you were married.'

'Could you?' said Edna, as she unlocked a drawer, and took therefrom a faded, water-stained book.

Letty held it gently, crying a little over it.

'Poor fellow! poor Julius! He was very fond of me.'

Asking no more questions, she returned the pocket-book to her sister. The tribute to the dead was paid, and its painfulness got over. Her emotion had been sincere enough, but she was not sorry to end it and revert to other things. She began turning over the various contents of the drawer.

'What have you here? A pair of baby

shoes. I should have thought your stock of them had been worn out long ago.'

'These belonged to my little girl that died.' After a pause Edna added, 'You never lost a child, Letty?'

'No.'

And then the two sisters—mothers both—stood by the small treasure drawer, where, besides the shoes, lay one or two other trifles; sleeve ribbons, a sash, relics of the dead that we all are prone to keep somewhere or another, and learn in time to look at quietly, as one day others will look at relics of us. While gazing, their common womanhood and motherhood melted both hearts. Letty silently clasped Edna's hand.

'How old was she, poor little lamb?'

'Only four months. She was such a little delicate thing always, but the prettiest of all my babies. I was ill for nearly a year after she died, and gave a deal of trouble to my husband, but he was so good to me—so good!'

'Ah!' said Letty, sighing.

'However, I got well in time, and the year

after that my twins were born; twins like you and me, you know,' added she, affectionately. 'They comforted me, and now I am quite happy again. Only sometimes I wake in the night, fancying I hear my little girl crying to me from her cot, and—it 's hard, Letty, it 's hard.'

Edna leaned her head on her sister's shoulder and burst into tears.

Letty caressed her; kindly enough, but she was puzzled to know what to say, and so said nothing. Edna soon dried her eyes and quietly locked up the drawer.

'That's right; you don't fret about baby now, I hope? It would be wrong, with all your five sons.'

'I know that; I know all is right both for her and me, and I shall find my little angel again some day. Will you come down-stairs, Letty dear? I hear the bell for the children's dinner.'

At this meal 'Aunt Letty,' as she condescendingly announced herself, was an object of great curiosity and awe. The young Stedmans evidently viewed her with a slight distrust—all

save Will, who, imaginative lad as he was, fell a captive at once to his beautiful aunt, sat beside her, paid her his pretty, boyish, gentleman-like attentions, and watched her every movement with admiring eyes—the very eyes of his uncle Julius. Pleased and flattered, touched perhaps in spite of herself, by some of those ghostly memories which the new generation often so strangely bring back to us all, Mrs. Vanderdecken took especial notice of the boy, and said to his mother, half sighing, that she wished she had a son like Will.

And during the hour she stayed Letty was almost the old Letty over again. She placed herself in the fireside circle, where, with the mother as its centre, the younger children soon made themselves merry, and the two elders, busy with book and pencil—strangely enough Will was very fond of drawing—occupied themselves steadily and quietly, sometimes joining in the conversation just enough to prove that they were accustomed to be to their parents neither play-things nor slaves, but, so far as their years allowed, rational, intelligent companions. She talked

kindly rather than patronisingly, and seemed anxious to make herself popular. Letty never could bear not to be popular—for the time being.

Also—let us give her her just due—there was something in the atmosphere of this warm, bright little house which touched the heart, such as it was, of the unsatisfied rich woman, who had a mansion to dwell in, but no home; a millionnaire to provide for her, but no husband; and who, let her try to compel it as she might, could never win from her only child anything like the tender, mindful, reverential love that she saw in these five boys towards their mother.

'How fond your children are of you!' she said to her sister, as she stood arranging her purple ribbons round her still fair face, careful as ever to set it off to the best advantage. 'And they seem to obey you too. Now Gertrude is fond of me, poor little thing, but she never minds me one bit. I wish I could take a leaf out of your book.'

'Do you?'

'And then your boys all seem to get on so well together: never a cross look or a sharp word; but I suppose that is because you are never cross and vexed yourself.'

'Oh, yes, I am,' said Edna, smiling. 'But we are so many people in such a small house that we should never manage at all if we did not learn to keep our little tempers to ourselves. Isn't it so, Twinnies?' patting the round, curly heads which had intruded up-stairs. 'Come, jump up on a chair and kiss your aunt Letty—your great, tall auntie—and tell her she must be starting—Will and Julius shall take her to the railway station—and she must come and see us again as soon as she can.'

Mrs. Vanderdecken distributed most affectionate adieus all round, and departed with her two nephews. But she took care to dismiss them at the earliest opportunity, to avoid any possible chance of meeting at the train either some of her grand acquaintances, or, worst of all, her husband.

At the journey's end her carriage was wait-

ing for her, and she drove alone through the lovely Kentish country, beginning to wake up into all the freshness of early spring. Did it remind her—after her long absence from such scenes, for they had wintered in town last year—of many a long-ago spring? that in the Isle of Wight, for instance, when Edna nursed and petted her, and Dr. Stedman was kind to her, and Julius adored her. Or, perhaps, of later springs, when she and Julius sauntered about as affianced lovers, and watched the leaves come out and the thrushes sing in Kensington Gardens? Days when they were poor together—poor and hard-working, but very happy, or, looking back, it seemed that they were. And as she smoothed down her silken gown, and leaned lazily back on the cushions of her carriage, Mrs. Vanderdecken gave more than one sigh to the memory—now a perfectly safe and comfortable memory to dwell upon—of poor, drowned Julius, lost in his prime, forsaken, dead, and forgotten.

Passing the school-house, she recollected that she had told Gertrude to wait for her there,

thinking it a safe place of detention between the governess's hour of leaving and her own return. But, with fatal precaution, she had overshot her mark. For, the moment after having descended, she saw, sitting on the bench beside the school-house door, with Gertrude standing beside him and eagerly talking to him, the man John Stone!

Mrs. Vanderdecken's anger, not unmixed with fear, left her absolutely dumb. But Gertrude ran to meet her without the slightest hesitation —betraying no sense of having done wrong.

'Oh, mamma, I am so glad you are come! I have been waiting to tell you something! Something so wonderful, which Mr. Stone has just told me. You will never be angry with him any more. And Aunt Edna will be so glad; everybody will be so glad.'

'At what, my dear?' asked Mrs. Vanderdecken, a faint, cold fear thrilling through her.

'Stoop down and I'll whisper it, for it is a secret still, and only you and I are to know,' said the little maid, her eyes bright and her cheeks glowing. 'But he says—Mr. Stone, I mean—

that he is quite certain Uncle Julius is not dead at all.'

Had a thunderbolt dropped at her feet, Mrs. Vanderdecken could not have been more startled. For a moment she was silent, then she took to the usual refuge of fear—incredulous anger.

'Don't tell me such ridiculous nonsense. I don't believe a word of it. And you, Gertrude, you ought to be ashamed of yourself. Did I not forbid you ever to speak to this—this fellow again?'

'No, mamma,' replied Gertrude, boldly, 'you forbade me to bring him into the Park, but you never said I was not to speak to him. I met him quite by chance, and he walked on beside me. How could I help it? the common was as free to him as to me. Besides,' added the little creature, roused to rebellion by what she considered injustice, 'I would not have helped it if I could. Nothing should ever make me behave unkindly to a poor sick ——'

'Folly! I tell you, child, he is nothing but a low impostor.'

'I beg your pardon, madam? What were you pleased to call me?'

Stone had followed, walking feebly with the help of his stick, and now stood before the lady, taking off his hat to her with an air of mock deference.

Voices change, like faces, in course of years; or perhaps he intentionally altered his; or, still more probable, was the truth of the old adage, 'None so deaf as those who will not hear.' But even now Mrs. Vanderdecken showed no sign of having recognised who he really was. Her reply was given in unmitigated anger.

'I do not know who or what you may be, but I know you have no business with my daughter. I said, and I say again, that you are a low impostor. If you persist in following us about so impertinently, I will tell my husband, and he shall give you in charge to the police.'

The man stood a minute, face to face with her, apparently feeling neither insulted nor afraid. Then he said, in a very low voice—

'Mrs. Vanderdecken, you will neither tell

your husband, nor will you give me in charge to the police; I am quite sure of that. Look here!' and he took from his waistcoat-pocket a letter, —an old, foreign-looking letter, on which was still visible in a woman's hand the address, 'Julius Stedman, Esquire, Calcutta.' 'I have half-a-dozen more of these. They came into my possession—never mind how. They are not very interesting reading, but they might be useful. I was just going to show them to your little girl here.'

'Oh, no, for pity's sake, no!' gasped the mother, in an agony of terror, and placing herself so that Gertrude could not see the letter, she hastily bade her run away and call the carriage, remaining in it till she herself came.

Then, half blind with dread, she turned back and forced herself to look at this man, to find out who he really was, whether only John Stone, a poor wandering wretch, who had somehow got hold of her story, and still worse, of her letters—or some one more formidable still, *who*, she dared scarcely imagine.

There he stood, with the sun slanting on his bare, bald head and grey beard, leaning on his stick, his threadbare coat wrapped round him, the mere wreck of a man—as much a wreck as that poor broken ship which they had used to watch the waves beating on, off the Isle of Wight coast, and yet, like it, preserving a certain amount of dignity, even of grace, amidst all his downfall. A man deeply to be pitied—perhaps severely blamed—since every one has his lot in his own hands, more or less, to redeem or ruin himself—but a man whom in his lowest plight could not be altogether despised.

'I see, madam, you do not remember me, though I have the fortune—or misfortune—accurately to remember you.'

'How? Who are you? But no, it is quite impossible,' cried the frightened woman, shrinking back, yet knowing all the while how useless it was to shrink from a truth which every second forced itself more strongly upon her.

At that critical moment there came out of

the school-house two of her friends—the rector's wife and sister, who having heard that she was expected, waited to consult with her about a school-feast—for the Vanderdecken purse and the Vanderdecken grounds were always their prime stronghold in all parish festivities.

They met her with much *empressement*—these kindly women, whom she liked, and who liked her—for Letty Kenderdine's old pleasant ways had not faded out in Letitia Vanderdecken. She would have gone forth eagerly to meet them, but there—just between her and them—watching her like her evil genius, haunting her like an impending fate—stood this shabby, disreputable man. The man who had been the betrothed of her youth—whose arms had clasped her—whose lips had kissed her; to whom she had written those silly letters that a *fiancée* was likely to write, and unto whom she had been false with the utmost falseness by which a woman can disgrace herself and destroy her lover—an infidelity than which there is none greater or crueller, short

of the infidelity of a married wife. There he stood—she was certain of it now;—not John Stone, but Julius Stedman.

How it came about that he was still alive, or what had brought him hither, she never paused to think. She only recognised that it was, without a doubt, her old lover, risen up as from the very grave to punish her: to bring upon her her husband's jealous anger, her daughter's contempt, her neighbours' gossip. No wonder that the poor, weak, cowardly woman was overpowered with an almost morbid terror—a terror so great that she did not even perceive the faint fragment of right that she still had on her side;—namely, that for any man, let him be ever so ill-treated by a woman, to take upon her this mean revenge, was a cruelty which condemned himself quite as much as it did her.

But, there he was, undoubtedly Julius Stedman; and Mrs. Vanderdecken felt that if the earth would open and hide her from him she should be only too thankful.

Alas! the earth does not open and hide either sufferers or sinners, when they desire it. They cannot escape. They must stay and meet the consequences of the sin: learn to endure the suffering.

Mrs. Vanderdecken slipped a step or two aside, and received her rectory friends with a nervous, apologetic smile.

'I beg your pardon, but I was just speaking to this poor man, a very honest and respectable person, in whom I have complete reliance, and for whom I am most anxious to do all I can. I wanted to hear his story, but I will hear it another time, if—if he will kindly excuse me now——'

'Certainly,' said the man, with a formal and stately bow. 'Certainly. I have no wish to intrude upon you, madam. I am quite at your disposal any day. Good afternoon.'

He took off his hat once more, first to her and then to the other ladies, and walked away slowly, in an opposite direction.

'I know that man by sight,' said the rector's wife, looking after him in some surprise. 'He comes to church pretty regularly, I think.'

'Yes.'

'Poor fellow, he seems as if he had seen better days. My husband must call upon him. What is his name?'

'John Stone,' replied Letty, faintly.

'And you have been kind to him, as you are to everybody. You are a real blessing to our parish, my dear Mrs. Vanderdecken.'

CHAPTER XXVII.

MRS. VANDERDECKEN'S intense fear—a fear which it was now impossible either to fly from or to set aside—made her cleverer than ordinary. She carried on the conversation with her friends till she had furtively watched this man—once her lover, now her bitterest enemy—safe out of sight. Then she stepped into her carriage, much agitated indeed, but still able by a violent effort to control herself before her daughter, and account for her nervousness by saying how very much worn out she had been by her journey to London.

'But why did you go, mamma? Oh, I remember; it was about a bonnet. Still, I would not have you so tired and looking so ill for all the new bonnets in the world.'

'Don't talk to me till we get into the house and have had our tea. Then I shall be rested, and you can tell me all your story.'

'Very well, mamma,' replied Gertrude, with her customary acquiescence, and then sat looking out of the carriage window, amusing herself with her own thoughts, which were generally quite as interesting as her mother's conversation.

Upon her new discovery the little girl's fancy dwelt with a tenderness indescribable. Stone had told her that for many months Julius Stedman had been 'out of his mind'—though carefully tended by some Parsees who took pity on him, but never even knew his name. That he came to his right senses in some up-country station—all but penniless; and had enlisted for a soldier—seen much service—and was finally sent home to England invalided—at which critical point in the story Mrs. Vanderdecken's carriage appeared.

But Gertrude had heard enough. Her imagination was vividly excited. That most divine doctrine of Christianity, which comes as a natural instinct to the young, the gospel of repentance

and the forgiveness of sins, the joy in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, was deep in the inmost heart of this child. Her eyes filled with tears as she thought of poor Julius Stedman, looking not unlike the prodigal son in her pictorial Bible, coming home to his brother and sister; taken into the bright little house at Brook Street, and there made happy to the end of his days. She forgot one thing, which over-tender people also sometimes forget, though it is not forgotten in the parable—that the prodigal first said, 'I have sinned.' But in no way had Stone ever hinted that Julius Stedman—wherever or whatever he might be—was in the least sorry for anything.

However this was an ethical question, about which the child did not trouble herself. She only waited with painfully restrained impatience till she had leave to tell her tale.

This was not for an hour or more. Mrs. Vanderdecken kept putting off, on any excuse, what she so much dreaded to hear. At last, getting one of the not unfrequent telegrams that

her husband would dine in the City and not be home till next day, she took a little more courage, and stretching herself on the sofa in her morning-room, prepared to hear the worst, and to take things, hard as they were, at least as easy as she could.

'Now, Gertrude, while I have ten minutes to spare, tell me what was that silly story about Dr. Stedman's brother being still alive, which Mr. Stone told to you.'

For she had satisfactorily discovered that as Stone only did the child know him; he had, for some reason or other, been careful to preserve his incognito; nor, to Gertrude at any rate, had he identified himself with Julius Stedman—if indeed he was Julius. Sometimes a wild hope that he was not, that her own fears and some chance resemblance had deluded her, came to comfort Mrs. Vanderdecken. So, as carelessly as she could, she repeated the name John Stone, and found that her daughter received it with equal indifference. So far she was safe.

But when she began to hear the story so

minute in all its details, she felt that though a child might be deceived, no grown person could be, into believing it a tale told second-hand. Gertrude's accurate memory and vivid imagination reproduced, almost as graphically as it had been given to her, the history of the young man's passionate despair—how, having lost his bride, he determined to lose himself—at once, and as completely as if he had been dead.

'He wished his friends to think him dead, mamma. He thought they would be happier if they did: if he could drop out of the world and be utterly forgotten. Was that right?'

'I can't tell. And where is he? How did Stone know him?' cried the mother, with eager deceit—or perhaps wishful even to deceive herself.

'You forget, mamma; but then you know you are not very good at remembering things,' said Gertrude, patronisingly. 'Have I not told you ever so often that Mr. Stone declares he never saw Uncle Julius?'

Obvious as the quibble was, Mrs. Vander-

decken took it in for the moment and breathed freer.

'Oh, yes, yes; go on, child.'

'After he turned soldier he was knocked about the world in all directions. I'm afraid,' Gertrude added gravely, 'that he was sometimes very naughty. Mr. Stone says so: but he wouldn't tell me what he had done. I told him I thought the naughtiest thing of all was his not writing to his brother, who loved him so dearly, and would have been so happy to get him back again.'

'Did he ever come back?'

'Yes. That is the delight of it. Mr. Stone says he is certain he is in England—in fact, I almost think he knows where he is, though he did not say so. I fancy he—Uncle Julius that is (oh, please, mamma, let me call him Uncle Julius, for I feel so fond of him)—must be very poor, or very miserable, or something; for when I asked why he had not gone at once to his brother, Mr. Stone said, "No, he would never do that, for his

misery would only disgrace him." But mamma, that can't be true, can it?' said the child, appealingly. 'I am sure if I had a brother, and he were ever so miserable,—nay, even if he had done wrong, and were to come to me and say he was sorry, and would never be bad again, I would take him in and be glad to see him, and feel it no disgrace, even if he were in rags and tatters, like poor Mr. Stone. Would not you?'

'Yes,' said the mother, and knew she was telling a lie, and that one day God would surely condemn her out of her own lips before the face of her own child. She turned paler and paler, and scarcely could utter the next question—apparently needless, and yet which she felt she must fully assure herself of before she ventured a step further. 'But the lady, she who went out to India; did not Mr. Stone tell you the name of the lady?'

Gertrude's lip curled with the supreme contempt of indignant youth.

'No, he told me nothing about her, and I

did not care to ask. The false, mean, mercenary woman! Don't speak of her, mamma, she isn't worth it.'

No, the mother did not attempt to speak. She only turned her face to the wall, with a half-audible groan, wishing she could lie silent for ever —silent in the grave, where, at least, her child could not have the heart to say such cruel words, or she herself, hidden in the dust of death, would not be able to hear them. And yet she knew they were true words—true as the warm light in Gertrude's eyes, when feeling that she had somehow vexed her mother, though she could not in the least guess how, she crept closer to her and began caressing her and amusing her with careless words, every one of which stung like wasps, or pierced like arrows.

'You see, mamma, she must have been such a very heartless woman, as well as a faithless, and such a coward too. She never sent one line to Uncle Julius, to tell him she had changed her mind—left him to be told by somebody else—anybody who cared to tell him. It was the ship's

captain who did it, when he came on board, and he fell down on the deck as if he had been shot; Mr. Stone says it felt like being shot—that he laughed—and it did not seem to hurt him at all for a minute, and he got up and staggered back to the boat and landed again. After that, his mind went all astray. Poor man! Poor Uncle Julius!'

'There, that will do,' said Mrs. Vanderdecken, faintly. 'You have talked so much, you have quite made my head ache. I think you had better go to bed now.'

'Oh, no; it is hardly eight o'clock; and, besides, you will want me to wait upon you, and get you your paper-case and things. You know you have a letter to write, mother dear,' said Gertrude, coaxingly.

'What letter?'

'To Aunt Edna, of course, telling her that Dr. Stedman must come here at once.'

'Why?'

'Can't you guess, mamma? To see Mr. Stone, and get out of him everything he knows

about Uncle Julius. He would not tell me, but he must tell Dr. Stedman, who is Uncle Julius's very own brother. No time ought to be lost. You'll write, of course, mamma?'

'Of course,' echoed the mother, actually shivering with fear as this new difficulty in her position opened itself out before her. Vainly she turned it over in her troubled brain, wondering how she was to escape it. Escape, indeed, was what she most thought of; whether she could not, by continuing utterly to ignore him, and keeping still in dead silence the secret which she had so far kept, get rid, temporarily or permanently, of this man, who might be Julius Stedman, and yet might not. But in either case it could not signify much, nor for very long. He was apparently in bad health—he might not live. If he were Julius, he probably had his own good reasons for not wishing to be recognised by his brother; since, during all the weeks he had remained in England, he had made no effort to see him. And let the silly, romantic Gertrude have what notions she might—theirs could not be a pleasant meet-

ing. Indeed, as a physician in good practice, it might seriously injure Dr. Stedman to have thrust upon him a brother so low in the world. Was it not advisable, perhaps, to keep them apart?

So reasoned this woman, long used to view all things by the light of custom and convenience, and half persuaded herself to take the easiest course, of letting things alone, when she was startled by the voice of her daughter—the quick, decided little voice, which often half coaxed, half governed her to do many things against her will.

'Mamma, shall I bring you your letter-case now? The post-bag will go in half-an-hour; and here is your favourite paper with the crest upon it. I'll get you an envelope immediately.'

Mrs. Vanderdecken knew not what to do. This, which seemed to her child the most natural and simple course imaginable, was to her nearly an impossibility—a dread indescribable at the time, and the opening up of endless future troubles. For of the great enmity that the man Stone—or Julius Stedman—whichever he was—

bore her, there could be no doubt. He would do her harm if he could. Instead of aiding, she would thankfully have annihilated him. Not out of cruelty—poor Letty was not naturally cruel—but out of mere fear. Yet, are not half the wickednesses and barbarities of this world done out of simple fear? She did not mean to be wicked—she would have been horrified had any one suggested such a thing—yet more than once the dim thought crossed her mind—oh, if only that poor sickly man, whoever he was, had slipped away from the world, instead of coming here to be the torment and terror of her life!

Not daring to refuse her daughter—for what possible excuse could she give for so doing?—she sat with the pen in her hand—her irresolute, trembling, jewelled hand—until the stroke of nine, and then laid it down.

'I am so tired, Gertrude,—so very tired, and I hate writing letters. It is too late now, for I ought to word it carefully so as not to startle them. I 'll write it the first thing to-morrow.'

'Very well, mamma,' said Gertrude, passively;

she had had only too much experience of her mother's dilatory ways, her weak habit of putting off everything till 'to-morrow.' Still, she would not complain, this good child whom Heaven was teaching, as it has to teach the luckless children of some parents, by negatives. Though bitterly disappointed, she held her tongue, and indeed begun, as she often did, quietly to lay her own plans for doing what her mother would most likely leave undone, or do too late. But before she could settle anything to her satisfaction, nurse came to carry her off to bed, where she laid her busy little head down, and slept off, in multitudinous dreams, in which Uncle Julius, Aunt Edna, and all the rest, figured by turns, the intense excitement of the day.

Not so her mother. Mrs. Vanderdecken had to pay the penalty of an idle, luxurious life; her sleep often fled from her. In the wakeful silent hours every small grievance became a mountainous wrong. No wonder, then, that the same thing befell her now, and, after a miserable night, she arose sick, unrefreshed, driven

by sheer desperation into what yesterday would have been the very last thing she had dared to do—a resolve to go and see for herself whether her fears were true or false; whether she really had at her very door Julius Stedman, returned alive; who, though he could have no actual scandal to bring against her—Letty Kenderdine, with all her folly, had ever kept her fair fame clear—was not only himself a former lover, but was acquainted with the numerous love affairs of her youth—in her vanity she had often teazed him with them, and laughed at his ridiculous jealousy. Now, even if he did no worse, he might repeat them all, and make her the by-word and the laughing-stock of her neighbours. The idea of this low fellow, who, whatever or whoever he had been, had now sunk to be a lodger in a village ale-house, giving out to all the drunken hangers-on there that he was for years the plighted husband of Mrs. Vanderdecken of Holywell Hall! It nearly drove her wild.

To prevent this, by almost any sacrifice, she was driven to the daring expedient of attempting

an interview—a private interview—with the man who called himself John Stone.

At first she thought of sending for him to her own house—but Gertrude might wonder, the servants might gossip—besides, the man might refuse to come. In any sight she had had of him he had seemed more and more resolved to make her feel she had cause to be afraid of him, not he of her. Better seize him of a sudden, before he had time to settle what advantage he should take of her—whether he wanted revenge or only money. For still she clung feebly to her old delusion, that money could do anything, atone for anything.

Yet as she pondered over these things—considering how she might best protect herself from him—there came more than once to Letty a vision of her young lover, who would have given his existence to protect *her*, who worshipped the very ground she trod upon, who, though poor in worldly wealth, had been rich in everything else—most rich in the only treasure which makes life really happy—honest, hearty love. And

though she had got all she wanted—nay, was in a far higher and more prosperous position than she had ever dreamed of as a girl, still she felt that something was missing out of her life—something that never would come into it again. She could understand dimly what that text meant —'to gain the whole world and lose one's own soul.'

This feeling did not last, of course. Letty's nature was too shallow for any emotion to last long; and she shortly turned away from it to consider how she could accomplish, with least observation, her meeting with Stone.

It happened to be her day of district-visiting —when the village was accustomed to see her carriage waiting about, while she went from cottage to cottage, splendid and condescending, though sometimes a little alarming to the inmates. But Mrs. Fox's house was not included in her list, partly because the good woman was not quite poor enough to warrant her dwelling being taken by storm by a rich neighbour, who had no other excuse than the superiority of wealth

to give for so doing, and partly because Mrs. Vanderdecken did not consider a publichouse exactly 'respectable.'

Great, therefore, was the landlady's surprise when the Holywell equipage stopped at her door, and its mistress, leaning out smiling, requested to know if there was not a person named Stone lodging there?

'Yes, sure, ma'am; has been here since before Christmas; a very decent man, or I wouldn't have had him in my house, I can assure you. A soldier, ma'am, just come from India?'

'So I understand. I have had friends in India. I should like to see him,—and—it would be a pleasure to me to do anything I could for him. Will you tell him so?'

'That I will, Mrs. Vanderdecken, and I'm real glad too,' added the old woman, confidentially, 'for, to tell you the truth, he's sometimes a great weight upon my mind—poor Mr. Stone: not for fear he won't pay me—he does that reg'lar—but I can see he's poor enough, and very sickly, and has such queer ways. I was thinking of

telling our rector about him, in case anything did happen.'

'Don't, don't!' said Mrs. Vanderdecken, eagerly. 'The rector has only too much upon his hands. If you want things for your lodger—food or wine—just send to the Hall.'

'You are only too good, ma'am; and I've said to Mr. Stone often and often what a kind lady you be. But here he comes to speak for himself. My dear soul,' darting up to him and whispering in his ear, 'do look alive for once. Here is somebody come to see you—a kind lady as says she has friends in India, and wishes you well.'

Stone, who had been creeping lazily across the common in the sunshine of the lovely spring morning, looked about him in his wild, weary, confused fashion—he seemed sometimes half asleep, as if it was a long time before he could take any new idea into his bewildered brain.

'Don't bother me, Mrs. Fox, pray! Ask the lady who she is, and what she comes about?' and then, deaf, and blind, and stupid as he

seemed, he perceived the face leaning out of the carriage window. The mutual recognition was instantaneous.

'What do you want with me?' asked he, hoarsely.

'I want to speak to you—just half-a-dozen words. Will you come into my carriage, or shall I get out?'

'You had better get out.'

Driven desperate by her extreme fear, Letty obeyed. As she did so the mere force of habit made Stone come forward to assist her—as any gentleman would assist a lady—but by this time Mrs. Vanderdecken had recovered her prudence. Pretending not to see him, she rested as usual on her footman's arm, and descended leisurely from her carriage.

'Mrs. Fox,' said she, carefully addressing herself to the landlady, 'can I have a word or two with your lodger in your little parlour? And, coachman, walk the horses up and down the common, it is rather chilly this morning. Don't you find it so after India, Mr. Stone?'

Truly Letty had rather gained than lost in the art of keeping up appearances!

'Mr. Stone, my dear,' whispered the landlady, pulling him by the sleeve as he stood motionless. 'You're forgetting your manners, quite. Do go in and speak to the lady—Mrs. Vanderdecken—she is such a kind lady, and might turn out a good friend to you.'

And considering him woefully blind to his own interests, which were somehow or other in her charge, the old woman fairly pushed him into the parlour and shut the door.

So the two—once lovers—stood face to face together and alone; even as when they had parted fifteen years ago, expecting to meet again almost as husband and wife. They stood, looking blankly at one another across the sea of dead years which had rolled between and for ever divided them.

Hardly knowing what she did, Letty slightly extended her hand, but it was not taken, and then she said in a frightened voice,—

'I know who you are; but how did you come

here? I thought—everybody thought—that you were dead long ago.'

'You thought I was dead! Well, so I have been these many years. Shall I tell you who killed me?'

Mrs. Vanderdecken shrunk back, and then bethought herself that, whether he was mad or not, it was advisable to pacify him.

'I beg your pardon, I only meant that as we are both middle-aged people now, we had better let bygones be bygones. Won't you shake hands, Mr. Stedman?'

At sound of that old name—the boyish name, his and Will's—the artist's name which he had hoped to make famous, and give, covered with honour, to the woman he loved—the man started, and began to tremble violently.

'Don't call me thus. I have long since dropped the name; I have forgotten I ever bore it. I told you I was dead—dead!'

Mrs. Vanderdecken looked sorry, but she was too much afraid for herself to give way much.

'Pray don't talk in that sad fashion; I am sure there is no need. You are, of course, a good deal changed, and I am grieved to see it. You must have had a hard life in India, or wherever you were. I should like to be of service to you, if I could; if you would promise never to refer to youthful follies.'

'Follies!'

'You know they were such,' said Letty, gathering courage. 'Ours was just a boy-and-girl affair. We were not suited for each other, and should never have been happy. It was really quite as much for your sake as my own that I did as I did.'

'Stop!' cried Julius, fiercely, and rose up in his rags—his old coat was actually ragged now—to confront the lady—so much a lady to look at, so graceful and so elegantly clad. 'Stop. You and I may never meet in this world again; so at least let us tell one another no lies. There were lies enough told by one of us, fifteen years ago.'

His manner was so wild, that at first Letty

glanced towards the door; then rapidly calculating consequences—a new thing for her—she decided to propitiate him, if possible.

'This is not kind, nor even gentleman-like of you—and you were always such a gentleman,' said she, in a soothing tone. 'I dare say you were much annoyed with me at the time, for which I am very sorry, though I did all for the best. But you must have got over it now. And please don't speak so loud; people will hear you outside.'

'Oh, that is all you care for still, I see; how things look outside.'

His laugh was so strange, so dreadful, that Letty again doubted whether, at all risks, it would not be safer to get away from him. She looked towards the door.

'Excuse me, but since you have desired it, we will have out our "few words." You need not be afraid, I shall not harm you. I am not insane, though the quantity of opium I eat makes me a little queer sometimes; nor a drunkard; nor a thief, as you supposed me to be. But everything

else bad that a man can be—that a woman might have saved him from—I am, and it is your doing.'

'My doing!'

It was fortunate for Letty that at this moment her carriage passed the window, reminding her that she was Mrs. Vanderdecken after all. She rose in her stately height from the horse-hair sofa.

'If you talk in this way I must really go.'

'Not yet; I could not allow it. But pray be seated. Though I am aware it is but poor accommodation I have to offer you.'

'I cannot stay indeed. My position as—as a married lady——'

'A married lady!' repeated he, in the sneering tone of young Julius Stedman, deepened tenfold. 'Fifteen years ago you were in heart and vow married to me. When you gave yourself to another man you did—what the other women do who sell themselves body and soul to any man that desires them—what your Bible calls by the ugly word——'

'I can't listen! I won't listen!' cried Letty,

flushing up. 'Only a brute would speak in this way to me—me, a wife and a mother. Oh, my poor little girl!'

There was truth in what she said, and, maddened as he was, Julius felt it.

'I have done no injury to your little girl,' said he, more quietly. 'She in no way resembles you. She is a sweet little creature, and I am rather fond of her.

'You fond of her!' cried the mother, roused into courage by the one pure, unselfish instinct she had. 'And what right have you to be fond of her? What is she to you that you should have gone and made friends with her, and turned her heart against me by telling her my whole miserable story?'

'I have not done so—not yet. I have never mentioned your name.'

'But she will find it out, when she learns who you are, as she must when you go home to your brother.'

'I shall never go home to my brother. It is the last kindness I can show to him and his—to

keep away from them. I have seen them all, and that is enough. To make myself known to them would only disgrace them. They will never see me, nor hear of me, any more.'

The voice was so hollow, so sad, and yet so resolute, that for a minute it touched Letty. Then in her infinite relief that things were thus, she thought it wiser to leave them so.

'You may change your mind,' she said, 'especially if you should be ill.'

'No. I am accustomed to be ill alone; it will not be much harder—perhaps less hard—to die alone.'

'Ah, we'll hope not. You are too young still to talk of dying. But perhaps your plan is the best, after all.'

Julius regarded her, as she spoke so coldly, so indifferently—the woman who had been his idol, into whose hands had been given, as into many another woman's, almost unlimited power over a man, to save or to destroy him; who, loving him not blindly but faithfully, might have conquered his faults, developed his virtues, and led him, like

his good angel through the world, up to the very gate of heaven. But now ——

As he gazed the last trace of softness went out of the man's heart. He was no longer her lover, but her bitterest enemy.

'You are right,' he said. 'My plan is best. And now we need not mention my brother again. What else have you to say to me?'

'It was about my little girl. I want you to promise never to meet my Gertrude any more.'

'Why not?'

'Oh, can you not see? Only just consider.'

'I have considered, ever since I saw you at the railway-station—the rich, prosperous woman whom God would not punish. But I am juster than He—I will.'

'Punish me? What do you mean?'

'I will tell you, for I like to do things fairly and openly; it was you who did them underhand. That Sunday night, by the kitchen-fire in your little house at Kensington—do you remember it? I told you that you might make me either good or bad. If you refused me at once—point blank

—I might bear it—I was young, I should 'get over it,' as you women say. But if you trifled with me, or deceived me, I should never get over it,—I should turn out a vagabond and a reprobate to the end of my days. This came true. See what I am! and I repeat, it is all your doing.'

'Oh, Julius!'

She said it involuntarily, perhaps—or else to soften him—for she was growing more and more frightened, but it only seemed to harden him the more.

'Never utter that name again. I told you I had renounced it, and shall never resume it while I live, which will not be long, thank God! That is, if there be a God to thank for anything.'

'Hush! You are talking blasphemy.'

'Who made me a blasphemer? Who taught me to disbelieve in everything good, and holy, and sweet? Who turned me into a heathen, and then, as you say, into a brute? But it does not matter now; I shall be at rest soon. Only, before I die, I will make certain of your punishment.'

'Oh, this is horrible,' moaned Letty. 'And what do you mean to do to me?'

'Nothing that shows outside, if you are afraid of that. Nothing to make your neighbours laugh at you, and your husband ill-treat you, which, I understand, he sometimes does already.'

'It is not true,' cried she, faintly.

'True or not, it is no concern of mine. I mean to be very just, very judicious. I shall not disgrace you in the world's eyes. Nobody shall discover who I am—nobody but you. But I shall stay here, close in your sight, a perpetual reminder of your falsehood towards me, as long as I live.'

'You will do no worse than that? Oh, promise me.'

'Promises are not necessarily kept, you know. But I always had a trick of keeping mine; so I would rather not promise.'

'Only—only—' and the mother's voice grew sharp with misery, 'you will not disgrace me before my child—my poor little Gertrude that loves me?'

'I cannot say. It is possible I might take a fit of atonement; might make up for my various ill deeds by one good one, and prevent your daughter from growing up such a woman as yourself by giving her the wholesome warning of her mother's history. It would point a moral, would it not?'

Mrs. Vanderdecken groaned. 'But you cannot prove it. You have no evidence but your own word.'

'You forget. I showed you a letter. I have kept every one you ever wrote to me—not many—nor very brilliant—but sufficient. Suppose I were some day to enclose them in an envelope, addressed, not "Mrs.," but "Miss Vanderdecken, Holywell Hall?"'

In real life, people do not drop on their knees and beg for mercy, nor stand glaring at one another in fiendish malice and gratified revenge; we are too civilised for this sort of thing now-a-days. So, critical as the 'situation' was, the poor soldier and the fashionable lady maintained their positions; and nobody listening outside could

have heard a sound beyond the ordinary murmur of conversation.

Half frantic, Mrs. Vanderdecken fell back upon the last expedient that any wise woman would have tried. She put her hand in her pocket.

'You must be very poor. I am poor too. I get but a very small allowance. Still, I would give you this—every week, if you like.'

Julius took the purse, and fingered its sovereigns—truly not too many—with a half-disdainful curiosity.

'And so you are poor, after all; though you did not marry me? And you want me to accept your money? Once, you know you might have taken all mine,—by dint of working, saving, almost starving, I had gathered a good heap of it to lay at your feet,—but now—— Excuse me, I have no further interest in examining this elegant purse.' He closed and returned it.

'Will nothing persuade you then? Have you no pity for me—a mother with an only child?'

'None,' said Julius. 'Am not I going down to my grave, a childless man, with my name blotted out upon earth? No; I have no pity for you—none!'

'Yet you cared for me once. Oh, Julius, is all your love for me quite gone?'

'You must have a strange kind of love for Mr. Vanderdecken when you can condescend to ask another man that question.'

The insult—and evidently meant as such—roused every womanly bit of poor Letty's nature. She started up, burning with indignation.

'Mr. Vanderdecken is a better husband to me than ever you would have been, since you can so turn against me now. And for my little girl—my poor little girl—the only creature I have left to love me—if you wean her heart from me, God will punish you—I know He will. It is a cruel and a wicked thing to do; and if you do it, you will be a wickeder man than I took you for.'

And Letty burst into tears.

She had been given to weeping always—it

was her strongest engine of power over Julius; but it had no effect upon him now—at least not apparently. He rose and walked to the window.

'Your carriage is still waiting, I see. Had you not better go? It is a pity to agitate yourself needlessly.'

'I will go. And you may do what you choose. I never mean to speak to you any more. Good-bye.'

'Good-bye, Mrs. Vanderdecken. Allow me;' and on the latch of the door their hands met. Letty drew hers away with a gesture of repugnance, and passed out, never looking at him again.

When she was gone—quite gone, and even the faint perfume which her dress had left behind—Letty still liked perfumes—had melted out of the room, Julius sat down, exhausted, gazing wistfully on the place where she had stood.

'Was I right or wrong?' said he to himself. 'But no matter. Nothing matters now.'

And yet for hours after he wandered about the common, stricken with a vague remorse; also, in spite of himself, with a touch of something approaching respect for—not Letty, but Gertrude's mother—the woman whom, even while adoring, he had once half despised.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

LITTLE Miss Vanderdecken sat in rather a melancholy frame of mind under her yew-tree, by the pond. It was a very pleasant seat now, with the leaves all budding, and the birds singing on every side; but the little maid did not enjoy them so much as usual. There had been over-night one of those 'convulsions of nature,' as, with a pathetic drollery, the clever child had a habit of calling them, which shook the whole household more or less—the disputes between her father and mother, which are so sad for a child to see, and weaken so terribly all filial respect for both. The conjugal war had been violent, and lasted long; it had reached, and considerably entertained, the servants' hall, also the nursery, where Gertrude

had overheard not a few remarks upon 'Missis's' changeableness and selfishness, in insisting on the removal of the whole establishment at once to Brighton, and shutting up Holywell Hall entirely, for at least three months. Quite preposterous, the servants thought; giving so much trouble for nothing; and none of them wondered that Master objected to it. He, being 'close-fisted,' was with them the least popular of the two; but here they decidedly sympathised with him, as did his little daughter.

Gertrude could not imagine what had come over her mother, to be so persistent in her fancies, since, finding all persuasion vain, Mrs. Vanderdecken had actually started that morning for Brighton, to take lodgings there on her own account, for herself and her daughter. Gertrude, hating Brighton, and loving every nook in the pretty park at Holywell, was in exceedingly low spirits at the prospect before her, of which she could not at all see the end; for her father was obstinate, too, in his way, and it was hard for him, an old man, to be driven from his comfort-

able home, and forced to travel daily a hundred miles by rail, as he would have to do. At seventy he still worked at his favourite pastime of money-making as hard as if he had been twenty-five.

'I wonder how they will settle it between them, poor papa and mamma!' thought the child, dwelling on them with a sort of pity. 'I wish they wouldn't quarrel so; but mamma says, all married people do quarrel; if so, I 'm sure I hope I may never be married,' added she, kicking away a large fir-cone as contemptuously as if it had been a young lover at her feet; then stooping to pick it up again, and add it to a large heap which she had built round the root of the tree one day when she was listening to Mr. Stone's stories.

This changed the current of her thoughts, and she began to reckon how soon there might come a letter, in answer to the one which, if her mamma had kept her promise, the Stedmans would get late last night, telling them that Uncle Julius was not dead.

'Mamma must surely have written, even though she did come in tired from her district-

visiting. I wonder what it was that worried her so all day. Poor mamma!'

But, in spite of 'poor mamma,' who was so often worried, Gertrude's thoughts wandered longingly to the cheerful house in Brook Street, and the good news that was coming there—nay, had come already; and it seemed to her quite a coincidence, an opportunity not to be missed, when she saw passing down the footpath that crossed the park, an old woman, whom she felt sure was Mrs. Fox. She ran forward at once. 'Please tell me—I am Miss Vanderdecken, you know—how is Mr. Stone to-day?—and—has anybody been to see him?'

Mrs. Fox looked surprised, but dropped a respectful courtesy. 'I didn't know as you know'd him, miss; and I only wish somebody would come and see him, poor man! I was just going up to the Hall to ask your mamma if she would do so, being such a kind lady.'

'I am sure mamma would—but she is gone to Brighton to-day.'

'Oh dear, what a pity! What shall I do?'

'Can I do anything—take any message?'

Mrs. Fox turned, and, shrewd old body as she was, 'took stock,' so to speak, of the child.

'Well, my dear, I think you're a little lady to be trusted, and the servants might forget—servants in a big house often do. Would you please tell your mamma, when she comes back, that Mr. Stone is took ill, very bad, indeed; and if she'd see after him a little—she was a-talking to him in my parlour for nigh an hour yesterday morning.'

'Was she?' exclaimed Gertrude, excessively astonished, and then touched to think how kind her mother had been, and how she had misjudged her.

'And I dare say she had promised to be a good friend to him, as I told him she would, for I found that in his coat-pocket'—handing to Gertrude a small packet—which felt like a bundle of papers—addressed, 'Mrs. Vanderdecken.' 'It's likely certificates of character, miss; I thought I'd best bring it at once, and ask advice as to what's to be done with the poor man, for he's

very bad indeed—quite off his head, and knows nobody.'

'How did it happen?' asked Gertrude, greatly shocked, and yet feeling upon her a strange responsibility. For if this poor man lost his reason, or died, what means would there be of finding out anything about Uncle Julius? 'Please tell me, Mrs. Fox; I am nearly twelve years old, though I look so small, and mamma always tells me everything.'

'I dare say she does,' said the old woman approvingly, and went on to explain how that after the kind lady left him, Mr. Stone had gone out and wandered about all day, as he often did, returning for supper as usual; 'though afterwards he asked me for pen, ink, and paper, which was the only queer thing he did. But this morning I finds him lying straight on his bed, like a corpse, only not dead and not insensible, for his eyes kept rolling about, and he seemed to know what was said to him, though he never spoke one word. I think it's brain-fever, myself, but I'd like to take advice as to what's to be done, for I

know nothing of him except his name. Poor fellow! and yet I'd do anything for him; he lies like a lamb, and follows me up and down with his eyes;' and the old woman wiped hers with her apron before she could say another word.

'And has nobody been to see him?' inquired Gertrude, cautious through all her anxiety, for she felt that the story of Uncle Julius was a family secret not to be gossiped about in the village.

'Who was there to come, miss? he hasn't a single relative or friend, as I knows of. But I thought your mamma might have heard—he might have told her something yesterday—she being a lady, and somehow I've often fancied Mr. Stone was a born gentleman. And, anyhow, she might have got him a good doctor.'

'I know a doctor,' cried Gertrude, eagerly; 'I'll send for him at once. He will be sure to come, he is my'—uncle, she was going to say, but with the painful reticence which experience had taught her, stopped. 'If I write the letter,

can you find anybody to take it at once to him—to London?'

'Tommy will; but would the doctor come, miss?'

'Oh, yes—I am quite sure he will come at once—if I say something to him which I shall say.'

And not without a spice of enjoyment at the romantic mystery which lurked under her compassionate errand, Gertrude fled into the house, and scribbled, as fast as pen could go, her impulsive letter.

'Dear Uncle Stedman,

'I write to you, because mamma is not at home to write herself, as I know she would. Please will you come down here immediately, to the "Goat and Compasses," Holt village, where lies the poor man of whom mamma wrote to you yesterday: John Stone, the soldier from India, who knows all about your brother Julius, whom everybody thought to be dead. He is very ill—Mr. Stone I mean—and if he dies you might

never find out your brother. Please come at once.

'Your affectionate niece,

'GERTRUDE VANDERDECKEN.'

It was not till the letter was written, and Mrs. Fox away, in total ignorance of its contents,—except that it would be sure to bring Dr. Stedman at once,—that Gertrude paused to consider what she had done.

No harm certainly—a common act of charity towards a sick man—the man who had been so kind to her. And yet she was by no means sure that her mamma would like it—her poor mamma, who had shown such an unfounded jealousy of this Mr. Stone—why and wherefore Gertrude could not conceive. But, alas! the child had already, by sharp experience, learned to distinguish between what mamma liked done, and what in her keen instinctive conscientiousness she herself thought right to be done. And why? Because the mother had herself laid the fatal foun-

dation for all disobedience, in teaching one thing, and practising another.

'Yet I have done nothing that mamma told me not to do,' argued Gertrude with herself, after the letter, not the spirit; yet only as she had been brought up, poor child! 'I have neither written to Aunt Edna, nor gone to see Mr. Stone. And when mamma comes home to-night, of course I shall tell her everything. And, let me see, what shall I do with this packet? I 'll put it on a high shelf, and not touch it again.'

And though she was dying with curiosity to know what was inside it—no doubt something relating to Uncle Julius—she restrained herself, and looked at it no more. Nay, she did what was harder still, though her little heart was bursting with sympathy and anxiety—during that whole long day, she neither went herself, nor sent any of the servants to inquire how things fared with poor Mr. Stone.

* * * *

Edna and her husband were taking an after-

noon's stroll in the Broad Walk of Kensington Gardens; the place which they had haunted so much in their old poverty days—days when even the sweetness of being together hardly kept their tired feet from aching, or their anxious hearts from feeling that it needed all the love that was in them to maintain cheerfulness.

Now things, outwardly, were quite changed. No weary walking; Dr. Stedman had driven his wife to the Palace gate, and the carriage was to meet them at the Bayswater end. She walked beside him, clad 'in silk attire,' and 'siller had to spare;' and he had earned it all. Earned, too, as he rose in the world, those bits of delicious idleness which a man may lawfully enjoy, who, having done his best for his wife and family, yet feels that life is not all money-making, and that it is sometimes wise to sacrifice a little outside luxury for inward leisure—and love.

So, with a clear conscience, and a boy-like happiness, pleasant to see in one whose hair was already grey, he daundered on, with his wife hanging on his arm, listening to every bird, and

noting every budding tree, stopping continually to look in Edna's face and see if she were enjoying herself as much as he.

She did, though in a more subdued way. Women like her have natures at once lighter and deeper than men's; and no mother of five children is ever long without some anxious care or other. Still, for the time, Mrs. Stedman put hers aside: her sons were, after all, less dear to her than was their father. And as she walked along these familiar places, where she now came seldom enough not to disturb their old associations—she thought of him, not as he was now, but as William Stedman, her lover, with his love untried, his character untested, and both their lives looming before them in a dim rosy haze, under which might lurk—what?—They knew not—no lovers can know. Unmarried, a man or woman can stand or fall alone—but married, they stand or fall together. Perhaps, if, before she was wed, Edna had felt this truth as strongly as she did now, she might have been more afraid. And yet not so, for she loved him, and love and suffering

would have been better to her than loneliness and peace. But God had not sent her suffering—at least, not more than was needed to temper her joys; or it seemed so, looking back. She, like all pure hearts, had a far keener memory for happiness than for pain.

And now her life was all clear, nay, it was almost half done. She and William had attained —one nearly, the other quite, their half-century, and they had been married twenty years. As she walked on—thoughtful, for this spring season, which had been the time of her courtship and marriage, her eldest son's birth and her baby's death, always seemed to make her grave—Edna clung with a tenderer clasp than ordinary to the arm which had sheltered and supported her so long.

'What are you thinking about, my wife? You have been silent these fifteen minutes.'

'Only five, or I am sure I should have heard of it before,' said Edna, smiling. 'You and the boys think something dreadful must be the matter if ever I chance to hold my tongue.'

'Well, but what were you cogitating on? I like to hear. If you had put all your pretty thoughts into a book, you would have turned out a celebrated authoress by this time.'

'Oh, no, thank goodness! for then how could I look after you and the five boys? But, seriously, I was thinking of something which I daresay some of the clever people who come to our house might find a grand subject for writing on.'

'What was it?'

'Did you notice, as we drove through Kensington, a pawnbroker's shop—with a notice in the window,—'To be sold, unredeemed pledges.' It struck me how, in our human lives, so many early pledges are for ever unredeemed.'

'That is true,' said William, sadly.

Edna hastened to change the conversation. 'However, we did not come here to moralise. Tell me about the cottage at Sevenoaks.'

This was a project, dreamed of hopelessly for many years, and this year in a fair way of being accomplished. All her life Edna had hated

London, and yet been obliged to live in it: and all his life, for the last twenty years, Dr. Stedman had determined that the first use he would make of any wealth that came to him, should be to buy a cottage, where his wife, country-born and country-bred, could take refuge whenever she liked among her beloved fields and flowers.

'Yes, I'll tell you all about the cottage by-and-bye. It, at least, will not be one of the pledges unredeemed. We have not had many of these.'

'Oh, no! Thank God, William—no.'

'Sometimes, when I look back these twenty years upon my life, and think what you have made it——'

'What God has made it.'

'Yes, through you.' He stopped, and loosing her arm, 'eyed her over,' as she called it, from head to foot. 'Such a little woman she is!' said he, fondly, 'but what a spirit! When we were poor—how the tiny feet kept trotting about all day long—and the small head wore itself out in ingenious contrivances! And what a cheerful

heart she kept—how she met all the world and its care without one fear!'

'There was no need for fear—I had not a single-handed battle to fight. There were always two of us. And we were always agreed.'

'Not quite, perhaps,' said Dr. Stedman. 'Especially when we began to rise in the world—and I might have been foolish sometimes—only this grave little face kept me in my balance. Who forbade the brougham, and made me be content with cabs, till I had a carriage I could honestly ride in? Who refused, year after year, to take her autumn pleasuring as many wives do, because her husband would only have to work the harder for it?'

'William!' with a laugh and a stamp of her tiny foot, though the tears stood in her eyes, 'do hold your tongue or I shall begin to quote against you,—

> "Who ran to kiss me when I fell,
> And would a pretty story tell,
> And kiss the place to make it well?
> My Mother."

But,' added she, gravely, 'though we may have made many mistakes, and done many a wrong thing, perhaps even to one another—the pledge my husband gave me on his marriage-day has not been one of these melancholy "pledges unredeemed." I could begin and tell my tale, too —of all your patience, and tenderness, and self-denial—so much harder for a man than a woman. But I 'll tell nothing—unless I should happen to go up first and tell it to the angels.'

'Don't talk nonsense,' said William, hastily, and reverted at once to the subject of the cottage at Sevenoaks.

The plan had so delighted him, that he entered into its minutest details with the eagerness of a boy, and Edna was a long time before she had the heart to suggest the only objection she saw to it, namely, that it was on the same line of railway as—indeed, only a few miles distant from—Holywell Hall.

'And, if her husband has the objection that she says he has to the intercourse of our families, this might place my sister in rather a painful

position—poor Letty!' Somehow, after her last visit, Edna had always called her 'poor Letty.'

'I cannot see that we need modify our plans on account of either Mr. or Mrs. Vanderdecken. They have never shown us any consideration, and we owe them none.'

William spoke in that formal tone, almost akin to severity, which any reference to his wife's sister always produced in him; and Edna answered, gently,—

'You are quite right, and it would be foolish in us to be affected by these difficulties. Still, they do exist, and I know you will feel them far more than I shall.'

'Possibly, because you only feel them for yourself, while I feel them for you. It makes a good deal of difference. But we will not discuss these matters, my dear. Whenever your sister likes to come to my house, she can, for it is your house, too: but never expect me to enter hers. And I shall take this pleasant little cottage, and

live in it, even were it under the very shadow of Holywell Hall.'

Edna dissented no more—for she knew it was useless—her husband had a will of his own—and most often it was a right and just will. In this matter she found herself incapable of judging, especially as she was dimly conscious that, had she been in his place, she would have felt as he did—that no consideration on earth should have induced her to cross the magnificent threshold of a brother who had in any way slighted her husband. But he had no brother—oh! poor, poor Julius! So she set her mind to bear for the living lost that pain which her husband had long endured for the dead—nor wondered that William, strong in his hatreds as in his loves—shrunk with a double repugnance from every mention of her sister Letty.

She walked on silently, hoping that the thrushes would sing peace into his heart as well as her own, which felt a little sad and sore, in spite of the brightness around her. It is so easy, so blessed to see God's hand moving behind some

human hand, for good; but when the same occurs for evil, or what appears to us as evil, the trial of faith is somewhat hard. It has cost her a good deal to 'forgive God Almighty,' as a forlorn mourner once expressed what many a mourner has thought since, for the lot of poor Julius.

And thinking of him, in these pleasant places —where they had so often been together—of him far away from the world and all its riot and care, gone into peace, though how and where no one knew—Edna quite started when her husband said suddenly,—

'Look, there comes Julius.'

Julius their son, of course; walking quickly towards them with a letter in his hand.

'This came just after you were gone, father. A boy brought it and said it was very important —about some one who was dying—so I hunted you up as fast as I could. I think,' he added, in a whisper to his mother, 'that it has something to do with the Vanderdeckens.'

'Oh, William, what is it? Nothing very bad?'

'Look here,' and he made her read the letter over with him—little Gertrude's letter. 'What does she mean? What did your sister write to you?'

'Not one single line.'

Dr. Stedman, violently agitated as he was, again perused the letter carefully. 'See what it says—"*Your brother, whom everybody thought to be dead.*"'

'It is possible, William—only barely possible. But we must find out. Read on.'

'This man—who knows all about him—this John Stone, who I suppose sends for me—did I ever have any John Stone among my patients?'

'No,' said Edna, decidedly, being one of the few doctors' wives who are trusted with all their husbands' concerns.

'A soldier, too, from India. If he had any tidings to bring, why did he not find me out himself? It was easy enough to do so.'

'Mother,' interposed Julius, greatly excited, 'once, lately, a foreign-looking soldier kept

hanging about our house for a whole morning. Will and I both spoke to him. So did you.'

'Yes, I remember, a thin, sickly, rather elderly man, with a long grey beard. Perhaps he was John Stone. But we must not detain papa here. William, you will start at once?'

'Certainly.'

'Julius, run and look out for the carriage,' said Edna, as she took her husband's arm, trying to shield his emotion even from his own son—fond and tender as the boy was, how could he understand it?

Without another word the two passed rapidly down the Broad Walk to the Bayswater gate, whence, almost as silently, they drove direct to the railway station.

Edna kept close to her husband until the train should start.

'You cannot say what time you will be back, of course, but let it be as soon as possible.'

'Most certainly. Julius, you'll take special care of your mother to-night?'

'That I will,' said the boy, tucking her under

his arm in his loving, protecting way. 'Cheer up, mamma. Suppose papa should bring home some news—real news—about Uncle Julius. Or if he were to come back again alive after all. What a jolly thing that would be!'

'Hush!' whispered his mother, and then left her son's arm to lean forward and whisper to his father. 'I wish I were going with you. Take care of yourself, William my darling.'

After Dr. Stedman reached the station he was bound for, he found he had a three-mile walk before him, and it did him good. His mind was all confused and bewildered, and the sentence in Gertrude's letter, 'whom everybody believed to be dead,' kept running in and out of his head, awakening strange hopes, which sank the next minute into the old dull quietness which had succeeded the long suspense of pain. Julius might be alive—it was just within the bounds of probability, but how and where had he lived, in what manner had he contrived so long to hide himself from them, and what steps could be taken to discover him? Why had Mrs. Vanderdecken

not written?—so like her though—and what if this delay of hers were to make everything too late, and John Stone should die with his secret untold?

As Dr. Stedman thought of this chance, he ground his teeth together—it seemed to be the last wrong Letty had done him. He walked on, fierce and fast. If he could have hated anything so frail as a woman, it would have been this woman, who, from her accursed weakness, had been the bane of his brother's life.

His brother,—his own, only brother. Though William Stedman was no longer a young man by any means, and had been knocked about the world enough to make his life appear long, even to himself, still, as he walked to-day between the bursting hedge-rows, and under the budding road-side trees, his boyish days came back to him, vivid as yesterday. He seemed to see the two little lads who used to go birds'-nesting on Saturday afternoons—the two youths in their teens—always together, like his own two elder boys, delighted to seize the opportunity of any stray

half-holiday to ramble away for miles across country, returning, tired indeed, but, oh! so merry, with a mirth that never flagged, for Julius' light nature always stirred up his own graver and more phlegmatic one, so that they suited better than if they had been more alike. And after all the years that had rolled between, busy and prosperous, anxious and sad, Will's heart leapt back with a passionate rebound to those years that were gone for ever; and he felt as if he would give nearly all he had in the world,—except his wife and children,—to have Julius back again, or only to see some one who could tell him how and where he died.

Dr. Stedman reached Holt Common just at twilight. A lovely spot, a heavenly evening; just the hour and place that would be sweet to die in, for one unto whom death was better than life. But the doctor, accustomed to fight death hand to hand, also fully recognised the blessing of life, and the duty of preserving it. Wasting not a moment in useless delay, he hurried as fast as he could to the door of the Goat and Compasses.

'You have a lodger here,' said he, stooping his tall head to enter the bar, 'a soldier, John Stone by name, ill, as I understand. Can I see him? I am a physician. My name is Stedman.'

For he had determined not in the smallest degree to allude to the Vanderdeckens, or to his connexion with them.

Mrs. Fox rushed forward, infinitely relieved. 'Dr. Stedman, sure? The gentleman the little Miss sent for? Oh, sir, I'm so glad you've come. Will you walk up-stairs?'

'Stop a minute. Are you his sister, or mother, or what?'

'Only his landlady—Mrs. Fox, at your service. But I can't help feeling for him, poor fellow; and I'm sure I'd look after him as if I was his mother, for he doesn't seem to have a friend in the world.'

'A young man, or old?'

'Neither, sir. Maybe a bit older than you are.'

'Older than I am?' said Dr. Stedman, and a wild possibility that had lurked in some corner of

his brain dropped out of it completely. To him, his brother Julius was still a young man. 'Poor fellow! I'll go to him directly; but if, as my son found out from your messenger, his brain is affected, I cannot talk to you much in his room; so tell me here all you know about him.'

Mrs. Fox did so, but her statement was too involved and confused for Dr. Stedman to gain much more information from it; so, afraid of losing time, he bade her take him up at once to his patient's chamber.

The good old woman had been very mindful over her charge. His sick-room was quiet and in order; he had everything comfortable about him —clean linen, smoothly arranged pillows and sheets, and a neat patchwork counterpane, upon which the two thin hands lay stretched, like the dead passive hands which tender friends straighten out in peace, never to work any more.

Indeed, in the darkened room, the figure on the bed looked altogether not unlike a corpse, being quite still, with wet cloths on the head, and the eyes closed. But at sound of the door-latch

they opened, and met the two incomers with that strange, glassy, unseeing stare peculiar to brain disease.

'This is a doctor, my dear,' whispered Mrs. Fox, soothingly. 'A kind gentleman from London, who has come to see you and make you well.'

'Indeed I hope so, my poor fellow,' said the doctor, kindly, as he sat down by the bedside.

At sound of his voice the sick man turned his head feebly round, and looked at him with a kind of half-consciousness; a long shiver ran all through his frame: then he closed his eyes, and clasped his hands together as if bent upon concealing some secret, which, with the last remnant of life or sense that remained to him, he was determined to keep.

'Let me feel your pulse—I 'll not hurt you,' said Dr. Stedman, as with his quiet, determined, professional manner he unlocked the rigid fingers, and drew the hand towards him. The face he had not recognised in the least, it was so covered

with beard, so totally changed; but the hand with its long fingers and delicate filbert nails—the true artist's hand—startled him at once.

'Doctor, what 's the matter?' cried Mrs. Fox.

'Nothing,' said he, controlling himself at once. 'Only give me more light. I want to look at my patient.'

'No, no!' A sound, hollow as if out of the grave itself, came from the sick man's parched lips. 'No light—no! Send the doctor away: I want none. I want to die.'

Without answering, Dr. Stedman rose and drew up the blind. But by this time the gleam of sense had faded entirely out of the poor face; it was sharp set, and vacant with the terrible vacuity of a human face from which—temporarily or permanently—the conscious mind is quite gone.

Will stood looking at him—this utter wreck of all he had once been so proud of, so tender over, almost with the tenderness of a man over a woman. Then, stooping over Julius, with one

great smothered sob, he kissed him on the forehead; softly, as he would have kissed the dead.

'Thank God! it may not be too late. Mrs. Fox, I must send a messenger to my wife at once. This is my brother.'

CHAPTER XXIX.

MRS. STEDMAN was sitting with all her children round her, trying to make the evening pass as usual, in reading, lesson-learning, drawing, broken by fits of play and merry chat. None of the boys, except the eldest, knew of what had occurred, or saw anything remarkable in their father's absence; and she had charged Julius to be silent for the present. He, wise and grave beyond his years, and his parents' confidant in many things, was the only one who had been told more about Uncle Julius than that his father had had such a brother, who died abroad. And even he knew comparatively little; but it was enough greatly to interest and excite him. Besides, his mother—the one grand idol of his life, whom he

worshipped with that adoring filial tenderness which is Heaven's best instrument for making noble men—his mother had been put into his charge, and he watched her with especial care—distracted the attention of the rest from her—and hovered about her with endless little caresses, listening all the while to every sound of the hall-bell, which made her start whenever it rang.

For Edna, more imaginative than her husband, and quicker to put things together, could not get out of her mind a strange impression, which came very near the truth. And when her son brought her a letter, having first carefully allured her away from the rest, that she might read it unobserved, her hands shook so that she could scarcely break the seal.

The next minute she had burst out with a great cry of 'Julius!'

Her boy ran to her alarmed, and took her in his arms—his dear little mother.

'Not you, my son. I did not mean you but your uncle Julius. Papa has found Uncle Julius.'

There is a belief—a feeling—Julius had had it strongly not many weeks before, when he stood in the dark outside his brother's shut door,—that if the dead were to come back to us again, they would find their place filled up, their loss mourned no longer, and the smooth surface of daily life grown greenly over them, like the grass over their graves. This is true, in degree, and Infinite Mercy makes it so; else human nature could not possibly endure its anguish to the end. But there are exceptions, and the present was one of them. Julius—poor prodigal as he might be—had fed on his own swine's husks silently far away; he had never either disgraced or wronged any one, least of all his brother. Heavy grief though he had caused, there was mixed with it none of that aching bitterness which Edna felt in her own heart, and the mute contempt which she read in her husband's face, whenever she chanced to mention her sister. Therefore, her rejoicing over the lost and found was as unclouded as her love—and she had always loved Julius.

The wonderful news could not be long hid;

especially in this loving family, where the parents kept none but necessary secrets from their children. The mother was soon the centre of an eager group, asking all manner of questions, and evidently regarding the whole matter as a sort of real-life fairy tale.

'Don't bother mamma, children,' said Julius, with tender authoritativeness. 'Come away with me, and I 'll tell you as much as I know, while she reads papa's letter.'

Dr. Stedman had written, not telegraphed, that he might startle her less and give her the latest intelligence, and had sent his letter by the faithful Tommy Fox, who was to remain that night at Brook Street, and bring Mrs. Stedman back with him the first thing next morning.

'I do not want you until the morning,' wrote William to his wife. 'You must get a good night's rest, for I fear you may have some days, or perhaps weeks, of heavy nursing here. However, if he survives the next twenty-four hours, he will live, I doubt not. I might have sent for you to-night, but I thought it best not.'

Edna felt also that it was best not—that not even his wife should share in this solemn watch which William kept so faithfully—uncertain whether after all his brother might not slip away, unrecognising and unrecognised, into the next world. But even if Julius died, it would be a lighter burden to bear than that which Dr. Stedman had borne so patiently, so silently, all these years; not suffering it to darken his home-life, which would indeed have been both foolish and wrong. Still it was there—and his wife knew it. Almost every human heart has some such dark chamber in it; she had had hers too.

Now, was the grief to be lifted off or not? Edna could not tell; nor William. He had only said, in reference to the future, one thing—'If Julius recovers, will my wife take him home?' At which the wife smiled to herself. There was no need to answer that question.

So, it was necessary to prepare for possibilities; and first, by telling the children as much of their uncle's history as she thought advisable. They were not inquisitive or worrying children. Still

they had their natural curiosity, increased by the very few facts she was able to give them; indeed little more than that Uncle Julius, whom they had supposed to be dead, had reappeared, and at last come home.

'But why did he not come home before, mamma?'

'Being a soldier he could not do that, I suppose.'

'Still, he might have written,' said Julius a little severely. 'It was unkind of him to let you and papa imagine he was dead, and grieve after him for so many years.'

'People sometimes do unkind things without meaning it, or, at least, without definitely intending it,' said the mother, gently. 'When you are as old as I am, my son, you will have learned that ——.' Here she stopped, hindered by the great difficulty with all young people—how to keep them sternly to the right; and yet while preaching strict justice, to remember mercy. 'In truth, my children,' added she, with that plain candour which had been her safeguard all her life, and

taught her sons to be as fearlessly true as herself, 'it is useless to question me; for I know almost nothing, except that papa has found his brother again, which will make him so happy. You like papa to be happy, all of you?'

'Ah, yes!' and they ceased troubling her with their wonderings, but with the brilliant imagination of youth, darted at once to the possibility of Uncle Julius's appearance among them, making endless speculations and arrangements concerning him. The twins, hearing he had been a soldier, brought out their favourite toy-cannon, with a man behind it, which man they immediately named 'Uncle Julius.' Robert, who had set his heart upon wandering half over the world, exulted in the thought of all the information he should get about foreign countries; and Will, after much meditation, leaped at once to a most brilliant conclusion.

'That folio of drawings you keep, beside the old easel in your bed-room, mamma—were they not done by Uncle Julius? You said he was an artist before he went away to India.'

'Yes.'

'And clever, too, to judge by those sketches, which you have never properly shown me yet, and will not let me have to copy;—very good they are, some of them,' continued Will, with the slightly patronising tone of the younger generation. 'Of course, he is too old to make an artist now; but he might help to make me one.'

'Perhaps,' said the mother, and wondered whether Uncle Julius would recognise, as his brother and she had long since begun to do, the eternal law of progression, whereby one generation slips aside, or is set aside, and another takes its place—a law righteous and easy of belief to happy parents, but hard to others, who have to drop down solitary and childless, into the great sea of oblivion, leaving not a trace behind. As she looked on her bright, brave boys growing up around her, in whom her memory and their father's would live, long after both were in the dust, Edna thought of Julius, and sighed.

'Now, my little man, you must chatter no

more, but be off to bed; for mamma has a great deal to do to-night.'

Nevertheless, she was not afraid, though it was a small and already full house in which she had to make room for the wanderer; but the capacity of people's houses often corresponds with that of their hearts. And she had good servants —a good mistress usually has—and helpful, unselfish children. Her eldest, especially, followed her about the house, assisting in her plans and arrangements almost as cleverly as a daughter, and yet was so manly, so wise, so reliable, that for the hundredth time his mother pitied all women who had not a son like Julius.

Yet when he and she sat together over the fire, the house being silent and all preparations made, both for her temporary absence and for her return with poor Uncle Julius, if he recovered,—with the reaction from her first joyful excitement over, anxious thoughts came into Edna's mind. Was she right in bringing into her household and among her young sons this man, who might be so changed—whose life for fifteen years and more

was utterly unknown to her, except that he had sunk deplorably from his former estate? When her eldest son, looking at her with his honest, innocent, boyish eyes, said earnestly, 'Now, mamma, tell me all about poor Uncle Julius,' Edna trembled.

But only for a moment. She knew well, her anxious life had often taught her, the plain fact that we cannot live two days at once; that beyond a certain prudent forecasting of consequences, we have but to see the right for the time being, and act upon it.

'My son,' she answered, cautiously, as her judgment prompted, but honestly, as mothers ought, who have their children's souls in their hands, 'Uncle Julius has had a very hard, sad life. It may have been not even a good life. I do not know. But papa does; and he understands what is right far better than we. He says he wishes Uncle Julius to come home—he is so glad and thankful to have him at home. So of course it is all right. We can trust papa, you and I.'

'To be sure we can,' said Julius, and looked his father's very image while he spoke: so that Edna had no further fear even for her darling boy.

It was little more than ten in the forenoon, and Holt Common was bathed in the brightest spring sunshine, when Edna crossed it under Tommy Fox's guidance, to take the shortest cut to the Goat and Compasses. She scarcely looked at the sweet sights around her—the green mosses, the perfumed gorse—so full was her heart, trembling between hope and fear, wondering whether it would please God to give this poor wrecked life into their hands—hers and Will's—to be made whole and sound again, even in this world; or whether in His infinite wisdom He would take it to Himself, to do with it according to His omnipotent will, which *must* be perfect, or it would not be omnipotent.

There was a figure standing at the ale-house door—her husband watching for her. Edna looked rather than asked the trembling question

—'Is he alive?' which William's smile answered at once.

He had held up bravely till now, but when he found himself alone with his wife he broke down. Edna took his head to her bosom, and let him weep there, almost like one of his own little children.

But there was no time to waste in mere emotion: the patient must not be left for ten minutes. Nothing but constant watching could save the life which flickered like a dying taper, half in and half out of the body. Julius might slip away at any moment, giving no sign, as all the night through he had given none. It was impossible to say whether he even recognised his brother, though the pressure on the brain produced stupor rather than delirium.

'He lies, looking as quiet as a baby,' said Will, with a great sob. 'I have cut his hair and beard: he is quite bald. You would hardly know him. I wonder if he will know you, Edna?'

'Let us come and see,' answered Mrs. Sted-

man, as she laid aside her bonnet, and made silently all her little arrangements for the long sisterly watch, of which God only knew the end.

Her husband followed her with eyes full of love. 'There is nobody to do this but you, my wife. You would do it, I knew.' She smiled. 'And I have made things as light for you as I can. Mrs. Fox will take the night-nursing. She is evidently very fond of him—but everybody was always fond of Julius. My poor dear lad!'

The strong fraternal love—rare between men, but, when it does happen, the heavenliest, noblest bond, a help through life, and faithful even unto death—shone in William's eyes; and his wife honoured and loved him for it.

'Come,' she whispered, 'perhaps, please God, we may save him yet. Come and take me to Julius's room.'

For another day and night the poor brain—worn out by misery, and disordered by the continual use of opium—lay in a torpid condition,

of which it was impossible to foretell the next change. Then sharp physical pain supervened, and forced into a kind of semi-consciousness the bewildered mind.

The day he had spent out on the common—Tommy Fox afterwards confessed to having seen Mr. Stone lying for hours under a damp furze-bush—brought back his old rheumatic torments. He had over again the same illness, rheumatic fever, through which his brother had nursed him twenty years ago. Strangely enough, this agony of body was the most merciful thing that could have happened to the mind. It seemed to annihilate the present entirely, and thrust him back to the days of his youth. He took quite naturally the presence of Will and Edna, and very soon began to call them by their right names, and comprehend, in a confused way, that he was under their charge. And in his total helplessness the great difficulty which William had foreseen, the stopping of the supplies of opium, became easier than they had anticipated. After he had been brought back, as it were, from the very gates of the grave, to

some slight recognition of where he was, and what had happened to him, he seemed to wake up, as people often do after severe illnesses, with the freshness of a child—asking no questions, but helplessly and obediently clinging to those about him, till sometimes none of his nurses could look at him without tears.

Gradually, he passed out of sickness into convalescence, began visibly to amend in body, though how far his mind was alive to the things around him it was difficult to say. He noticed nothing much—neither the changes which Edna had gradually instituted in his ragged wardrobe, nor the comforts which she gathered around him in his homely room. He spoke little, and his whole intelligence seemed to be absorbed in trying to bear, as patiently as he could, his physical sufferings, which, for a long time, were very great. When at last Edna, to whose ministering care he had grown quite accustomed, proposed taking him 'home,' he assented, but without asking the slightest question as to what and where 'home' was.

Letty, either as Letty or as Mrs. Vanderdecken, he never once named.

Indeed, in the complete absorption of the time, neither Edna nor her husband thought much about her themselves. The near neighbourhood of Holywell Park troubled them not; the place was half shut up, the mistress being away at Brighton. Thence she never sent, never wrote; at which they were neither surprised nor sorry.

But the night before they had settled to quit Mrs. Fox's kindly roof, the good woman brought to Mrs. Stedman, for whom she had conceived a great admiration, a note from the Hall.

'I don't know if you knows Mrs. Vanderdecken, ma'am, but perhaps you do, as it was through her little girl I heard of Dr. Stedman. And she 's a kind lady — a very kind lady indeed: *he* saw her the day before he was ill. Didn't you, sir?'

Edna interposed, and stopped the conversation, but her caution seemed needless. The sick man took no notice, and she hoped he had seen and

heard nothing. However, just before she left him for the night, Julius called her back.

'What was that note you had? From your sister?'

'Yes.'

'Have you seen her?'

'No.'

This was all he asked, or was told, though, in much anxiety, Edna sat down beside him for another half-hour. By-and-bye, Julius felt feebly for her hand.

'Are you there still, sister Edna? I like to have you beside me. I know you now, and Will, too, though at first I did not. I thought I was dreaming. I have had so many queer dreams. They all came out of that box which you never will let me have.'

'No, never again.'

'Does Will say so?'

'Yes.'

'Then I suppose he must be obeyed. When we were lads, kind as he was to me, Will always made me obey him.' Julius smiled faintly, yet

more like his own smile than Edna had ever seen yet. 'Where is Will to-night?'

'Gone home, to get ready the house for us to-morrow, you know. Besides, he has his work to do.'

'Ah, yes! and mine is all done. I shirked it once; and now, when I want to do it, I cannot. Why do you and Will take me home? I would never have come of myself. I shall only be a burden upon you. Do you know, Edna, that I have not a halfpenny in the world!'

'Yes.'

'Except, of course, my pension as a soldier—a common soldier, which I have been—I ceased to be a gentleman, years ago.'

Edna smiled.

'Do not mock me, it is true. You had better not take me back. I shall only be a trouble to you. Nay, even a disgrace. Will is an honest, honourable, prosperous man, while I——— What will all your friends say?'

'We shall never ask them. But,' added Will's wife, in reasoning not her own, for her

own failed her, 'it is just the story of the piece of silver—" And when she had found it, she called her friends and neighbours together, saying, Rejoice with me, for I have found my piece that was lost."'

Julius turned away bitterly. 'Don't talk to me out of the Bible. I do not believe in the Bible. Only'—as if he feared he had hurt her—'I believe in you.'

'Thank you, dear.' She often called him 'dear' now, in the tone she used to her own children; for, in many ways, Julius had grown so very like a child. 'And I believe in the Bible. Therefore, I came here to nurse you, and keep you alive if we could. Therefore, as soon as you are stronger, I mean to take you home, to begin a new life, and never to speak of the old life any more.'

Tender as her words were, there was a certain authority in them—the quiet decision which Edna always showed—and nobody attempted to gainsay.

Julius did not, but lay quiet, with his eye-

lids closed, till at length he suddenly opened them.

'There was a packet—letters—which I think I made up just before I was ill. Where is it?'

'Mrs. Fox found it, and delivered it to the person to whom it was addressed.'

'And that was ——'

'Mrs. Vanderdecken.'

'Are you sure of that?'

'Quite sure. Now, go to sleep.'

'One minute,'—and Julius lifted himself up, and caught Edna's hand. 'Tell her—your sister—that for the child's sake I have forgiven her all. I will never harm her. Her daughter knows nothing—never will know. Say, I forgive her, and bid her good-bye from me.'

'I will,' said Edna; and then, still holding her hand, Julius dropped into the quietest slumber which he had yet known.

When alone for the night, Mrs. Stedman read over again the dirty-looking note, which had lain a whole day in the pocket of a small child, one of Mrs. Vanderdecken's Sunday class, by whom

it had been sent. Letty's cowardice had followed her to the last. There was in the missive neither beginning nor ending. Nothing that could identify it or its writer, or betray any fact that it was safer to conceal.

'I know all, and was glad your husband had been sent for to the poor man, you and he being the proper persons to manage the business. Give him my best wishes, and I hope he will soon get well. If I could do anything—but it is better not—you will understand that. Only if you like to come and talk it over with me, I shall be very glad to see you, for I am quite alone here, though I shall return to Brighton in two days.'

Edna closed the letter with a heavy sigh; and sat long pondering over it, and how she should answer it; whether it would not be advisable under the circumstances, and especially with regard to a future that was very difficult at best, to go and see Letty, as she asked, in

her own house, and, calmly but not unkindly, 'talk it over,' as she proposed, thus closing for ever the grave of a past that could return no more.

In her husband's absence, Edna was obliged to trust to her own judgment, and what she knew his would be. He had said more than once, that nothing should induce him to enter his sister-in-law's door, nor did his wife dissent from this. There is a limit beyond which self-respect cannot pass; and charity itself changes its character when it becomes the subserviency of weak right to rampant wrong. But Mrs. Stedman, who had not an atom of weakness about her, or pride either, felt no hesitation whatever in crossing, just once and no more, her sister's grand threshold; neither humbly nor scornfully, but with a kindly, sisterly heart. If she could do Letty any good, why, well! If not, still it was well, too. They would both see clearly, once for all, what their future relations to one another were to be.

So next morning, before Julius was well

awake, without saying anything to him or anybody, she started off across the common to Holywell Hall.

It was a very fine house, the finest Mrs. Stedman had ever entered; for her busy domestic life and narrow means had, until lately, kept her very much out of society. She admired it extremely, for she had such pleasure in anything orderly, fit, and beautiful. Yet, when her little feet trod on the polished black and white marble of the hall, and followed two tall liveried footmen up a magnificent staircase, stately, silent, and chill, her heart sank a little, and she was glad fate had not burdened her with her sister's splendid lot. It did not occur to her, in her utter lack of self-consciousness, that had such been the case, the probabilities were that Holywell Hall would have been as bright as Brook Street.

The footman went before, and she was following him at once into Mrs. Vanderdecken's morning-room, when she heard her sister's voice within, and hesitated.

'Stedman is the name, Wood?—I don't

know—yes, I do know the lady. Show her into the yellow drawing-room. Oh, she is here.'

Rather awkwardly, Mrs. Vanderdecken came forward, merely to shake hands, till, the servant having closed the door behind him, she stooped and kissed her sister, though not with much demonstration of affection.

'I am very glad to see you. It is extremely kind of you to come. You see I couldn't come to you—it was quite an impossibility.'

'Certainly.'

Then Letty burst out,—

'Oh! Edna, do give me a little comfort. I have been so frightened—so thoroughly miserable. This is indeed a wretched business.'

'I do not see that, since it has ended so well in Julius's recovery. He might have died. It was such a merciful chance that your little girl wrote to my husband.'

'Yes; and I assure you I did not scold her at all for doing so. I was only too thankful to get her safe away, where she would hear no more of that dreadful story, or of him, poor fellow: he

made her so fond of him. She cried her eyes out till I told her Dr. Stedman was with him, and that he was getting well. That is true, is it not?'

'Yes, thank God!'

'And nobody here knows who he is; but, like Gertrude, people think him Mr. Stone?'

'No,—Mr. Stedman,' said Edna, coldly. 'My husband was not likely to be ashamed of his brother, or to conceal his relationship to him. But you need not be alarmed; we have carefully hidden our connexion with you. No one here has the least idea that you are my sister.'

'Thank you, thank you!' And then, some dim notion striking Letty that it was an odd thing to express gratitude for, she added, half apologetically, 'You see, we are obliged to be careful. In our position people do talk of us so. And he was so violent, so cruel, to me—Julius, I mean. And there was something so disreputable—so dreadful—about his story. You know it, of course.'

'No, he has told us almost nothing; and we

'are determined to inquire nothing. My husband believes less in the confession of sins than in the forsaking of them. Unless Julius speaks himself, we shall never ask him a single question about his past life.'

'Well, perhaps that is your best course; any other would be so very inconvenient. I declare, when I listen to Gertrude's story —— but I'll just repeat it to you, for it will relieve my mind.'

And she told, accurately enough for her, Julius's whole sad tale, which he had told to the child, and her own interview with him, which had followed it.

The facts were all new to Edna, but she said nothing; how could she? From the sick bed beside which she had watched so long, she seemed to gaze on her elegant sister, gifted with everything that the world could give; and she understood something about the joy in heaven, not over the rich and the prosperous, but over one sinner that repenteth. The one question, Did he repent? was all she ever asked herself, and that time alone could answer.

'Was it not dreadful of him?' Letty continued, 'after all these years, and when I would have met him so friendly, to try to injure me thus? Ah, Edna, you don't know the agony of a poor mother who fears losing her child's heart.'

'No,' said Edna; 'but you need have no fear now:' and then she delivered, word for word, the message Julius had sent.

Letty was a good deal touched. 'Poor fellow, poor fellow!' she repeated several times, and wiped her eyes with her lace pocket-handkerchief. 'But why does he bid me good-bye? Will he die, do you think?'

'God only knows. The first danger is past, but there is a weary convalescence before him. He will never be really strong, William says; and if any ill turn comes —— But we will not forbode evils. I hope for the best.'

'Ah, you always did. You were always the cheerfullest, bravest girl. I wish I had been more like you.'

But these sudden compunctions, which ended in nothing, only made Edna sigh. She rose.

'I must go now, Letty. He will be waiting for me. I take him home to-day.'

'He? Oh, I had forgotten! You mean poor Julius. I do hope he will recover; tell him I said so. Where are you taking him—to Brook Street? Of course; you have no other house. Poor dear fellow, I am sure I wish him well. But are you sure he will not attempt to injure me?'

Edna smiled. It would have been a sarcastic smile once, when she was scornful and young; now it was only sad. She did not attempt to grow grapes from thorns, or figs from thistles, any more. She only understood, though it had been bitter learning, that all human creatures were of God's handiwork, and, if He had patience with them, so must she have.

'And now, Letty, good-bye; for I really must go.'

Upon which Letty eagerly begged her to stay.

'Why can't you have lunch with me, Edna, my dear? I am so dull, alone here. And besides, I should like to show you the house and

the conservatory; you were always fond of flowers. Ours are considered very fine, especially our orchids. Mr. Vanderdecken has paid sixty guineas a-piece for some of them.'

Edna shook her head. 'I have no time for orchids just at present.' And then, seeing real disappointment in her sister's looks, she agreed to stay with her another half-hour.

'Especially as we may not meet again for some time. You must perceive, I cannot ask you to Brook Street, and as for my coming here—it is useless. But we shall remain sisters, feeling very kindly to one another, I trust. And, Letty dear, if ever you are in trouble, and want somebody to help you ——'

Here she quite broke down. To the last day of her life Edna would never lose this sore-wounded, ill-requited love for her only sister.

Letty kissed her, not unaffectionately.

'Thank you. We all have trouble, some time or other, I suppose. But I hope mine is far off still. I am very comfortable, and Mr. Vanderdecken is extremely kind. Then, too, I have

such a pretty house. Won't you come and look at it? People say many a nobleman's mansion is not near so fine.'

This was true; and Edna's innocent, generous heart admired it so warmly, that her sister's spirits quite rose.

'Yes, I do think ours is a charming place, and it is a pleasure to show it to you. I am very glad you came to see me, and I only wish we could meet oftener, my dear. But I suppose, as you say, that is impossible.'

Edna was silent: she also felt that it was impossible.

'Gertrude will be disappointed that she has not seen you. She thinks a great deal of her aunt Edna. And, perhaps, by-and-bye, when she has forgotten all about Mr. Stone, who I shall tell her is quite well, and gone away to his own relations——'

'Letty, Letty!' broke in the other, earnestly, 'whatever you tell her, take care that it is the exact truth. With such a child as Gertrude—with any child—straightforward truth is the only way.

Forgive me—it will be long before I "preach" to you again—but I have no little girl of my own; and Gertrude is a dear child! Be careful with her.'

Letty looked a little vexed. 'It is hardly necessary to say that to me; but, Edna, I will take care of her. She is the light of my eyes—the best little girl that ever was born! Julius said he wished my child to grow up a better woman than her mother. Tell him, I trust she may.'

They had now passed out of the winter-garden, with its overpowering atmosphere of scent, into the healthy freshness of the spring morning—the delicious spring, which always brought back to Edna the days of her childhood, and, though it came late, and long afterwards, the spring-time of her happy love. This was twenty years ago, and yet, at scent of violets and primroses, and singing of nest-making birds, every year it came back again fresh as yesterday. It did now, when she thought of going home to her own blessed home, from which, in all her married life, she had never been absent so long.

'I must be gone, indeed. I have not another moment to spare.'

'Stay,' said Letty, hesitating. 'What hour do you go to the station? Let me send my carriage to take you—it would be easier than a fly—and—I should rather like to do it.'

But Edna declined. Kindly as she felt towards her sister, to accept favours from her was impossible.

'Ah, well, perhaps you know best. Julius might not have liked it; and, after all, it might have looked a little peculiar. So good-bye, Edna. Remember me kindly to all at home.'

So the sisters parted, indefinitely, without hinting at any future meeting. They were so different in themselves, and their lives had grown so wide apart, that much personal association would have been worse than foolish—fatal. It was far best that each should go her own way, until, or unless, the infinite chances and changes of this world should bring about a future which now seemed impossible—as impossible as that the

dead should come to life again, and the lost be found. Yet this had been.

As Edna crossed the park, her heart lightened almost into mirth by the gladness of the glad spring morning, and thought of Julius, whom she was this day taking home, with a wondering thankfulness almost equal to that with which the sisters of Bethany took home their brother Lazarus,—it seemed to her as if, unto Infinite Mercy, nothing were impossible.

CHAPTER XXX.

WHEN his sister-in-law entered his room, Julius was already up and dressed, in the clothes to which they had gradually accustomed him—Edna having spirited away the old regimentals, with everything that could remind him of his former life. To put it all behind him, and help him to begin anew, so far as there was any new life left in him, was their grand aim; and, so far, they had succeeded.

'Doesn't he look a sweet, dear fellow, ma'am, and not so very ill, after all?' said Mrs. Fox, who had hovered about him the last day or two with a tenderness indescribable.

Julius took the old woman's hand—her rough working hand—and kissed it with something of

his old chivalrous air, which had made him, even under his rags and tatters, still so completely, often so painfully, 'the gentleman.'

'It 's all owing to you, and my sister there, that the "dear fellow" is not underground now. Off with you, Mrs. Fox, and cook my last dinner for me in your own perfect style. I'm so hungry.'

'Bless you for that, my dear Mr. Stedman,' said the good landlady as she hurried away, and then Julius turned to Edna with a keen inquiry.

'You were out this morning. Where have you been?'

She never thought of answering other than the direct truth.

'I have been across the park, to see my sister. I wanted to bid her good-bye before leaving this place, as she and I are not likely to meet again soon.'

'You do not often meet?'

'No.'

'Did you give her my message?'

'Word for word.'

These were the sole questions he asked; in-

deed, it was the only time he mentioned Letty. Nay, when, on their way to the station, they met her carriage, and, to Edna's utter amazement, Mrs. Vanderdecken bent forward to bow and smile—altogether the courteous and stately Mrs. Vanderdecken—Julius returned the salute as he would have done to any other lady, and then leaned back, taking no more notice of her than if she had been a stranger.

But he did take notice, in a way that to Edna was infinitely pathetic, of everything around them in the outside world, which seemed as fresh to him as if he had never seen it before. He examined, with that keen, artistic eye of his, every bit of landscape that Edna pointed out to amuse him; saw the primroses peeping through the roadside coppices, and the merry little birds flitting in and out—nest-building—among the hedges as they passed. And though, when they reached the railway, he seemed to shrink a little from the sight of human beings, and entreated that they might have a carriage all to themselves,

still there was no morbid misery in his aspect, and no bitterness in his words. He seemed weak and weary—that was all. Only sometimes, in words he let fall—for he did not express it directly—there was the sad longing for rest, mingled with what seemed an unconscious echo of the Psalmist's cry, 'Oh, spare me a little, that I may recover my strength, before I go hence, and be no more seen.'

At the London terminus William met them, and almost without saying a word—he seemed as if he could not speak—half led, half carried his brother to his carriage.

'This is your own brougham, I see. You are a prosperous man now, Will,' said Julius, feebly smiling.

And then he lay back exhausted, and scarcely conscious of what was passing, till Edna thought that his 'going hence' was a possibility by no means far off. Still, if he died, he would die at home.

Home! A little, little word—only four letters—a thing easy to be had, and yet some never

have it—never know what it means, in all their lives.

Some do not care for it, either; Edna had once thought that Julius did not—but she changed her opinion now.

When they brought him, with considerable difficulty, to the large upper chamber, once the twins' nursery, but from which they had delightedly retired, on promotion, in favour of Uncle Julius—he looked round the room with a strange, sad, wondering air.

'How pretty!' he said; and then, 'How comfortable!'

It was both—having been arranged, half as a bed-room, half as a sitting-room, with all the skill that his sister could devise, and his brother carry out. But, as the sick man sank into the easy chair by the fire, and drew close to the blaze—shivering, though it was May—Edna and William turned away, almost ready to weep. For he looked so frail, so feeble—as if, let them kill the fatted calf, and bring the purple robe as they would—the festive food might drop untasted

from his lips, and the raiment of welcome be used only to wrap the pale limbs of the dead.

Things seemed dreary enough for some hours. The first excitement of his journey over—the first pleasure of finding himself in a real home—his brother's home, with all the old comforts about him, and above all the love that makes comforts quite secondary things—Julius broke down. With a great and bitter cry about his own 'unworthiness,' he turned his face to the wall, and sank into a paroxysm of despair.

'It is no use—it is all of no use. I am like that wreck off the Isle of Wight, which we used to watch—do you remember, Edna? how they tried and tried to save it, but could not. You cannot. This poor, ruined, wasted life of mine—you had better let it go down.'

'No,' said Will. 'No, we'll never let it go down.'

'And that wreck was not a wreck after all, Julius,' said Edna, cheerfully. 'After months of labour, they got her safe off, and now she goes sailing over the seas as bravely as ever.'

'Does she really?' said Julius, with a strange superstitious feeling that brightened him in spite of himself for a moment.

'Yes; for I saw her name in the "shipping intelligence" only two months ago. She has ceased to be A 1, of course, by this time; but she is a capital ship still, and sails steadily between here and America.'

'You don't say so?' cried Julius, rousing himself with a childish interest. But the momentary brightness soon faded, and he fell back into his former despression.

Will signed to his wife to go, and joined her a minute afterwards on the stair-head.

'Oh, husband, this is very hard!'

'No; I expected it. We must have patience. The evil of years is not conquered in a day.'

'But have you any hope?'

'While there is life there is hope. And, then, we know, another and a safer Hope begins. I should not lose it, I trust, even if after all our care He took Julius out of our hands, and said, "Give *Me* thy brother."'

William was deeply affected; but still, his wife saw, he was determined not to yield to despair. She put her arms round his neck.

'Yes; we'll hope still, and strive on, to the last. And however it ends, you have still me and the children.'

She went down-stairs and collected round her her eager little flock, whom their eldest brother had cleverly contrived to keep out of the way till now. She tried to sun herself in their merry, loving faces, unseen for so long; to hear all their history since she was away; and answer, so far as she thought it well, their endless questions about her own. But in the midst of them all, half her heart went back to the lonely, childless man up-stairs, whose blighted life contrasted so bitterly with her own full harvest of content. And when she looked round on her five boys, and thought —what if it were one day with any of them as with Julius, when there was no father's house to come to, no mother's bosom to shelter in? She grew almost sick with fear and sad prevision till William appeared. It was the blessedness

of Edna's life that strength, comfort, and peace, always came to her with the sight of her husband.

'How is he?'

'He is asleep,' said Will. 'And now let me come and sit in my old place; let all go on as usual.'

Taking up his newspaper, he pretended to read, but soon stopped to possess himself of his wife's hand—the small soft hand, lovely still, though, like herself, it was fading a little—changing into that sweet decline which is scarcely like growing old.

'Oh, how delicious it is to have you at home! How different the house looks, boys, now your mother is come back!'

'If she had stayed much longer,' said Robert, indignantly, 'I think we should have gone and fetched her back—from Uncle Julius or anybody. If she ever goes away again——'

'Nay, I shall never go away again. Never, I hope, till——'

But when the mother saw the bright faces all

fixed on hers, and looking to her for their very light of life, her heart failed her; she could not finish the sentence.

Soon all the evening routine went on as usual, broken only by those bursts of family fun, so small in repetition, so great in enjoyment; foolish family jokes, which brothers and sisters recall afterwards, when scattered far and wide, as having been the best jokes in the world. Gradually the troubled elders were won, too, from their cares, and relaxed into the pleasure of their children. The mirth was at its loudest—the boys laughing so that Edna could hardly hear herself speak—when the door opened, and there stood, in front of his brother's bright hearth and circle of happy children, Uncle Julius.

He was so pale, so haggard, his eyes so sad and wild, that the little twins gave a scream; and even Will, who was a boy given to poetic imaginings, shrunk back as if he had seen a ghost.

Julius saw this—saw them all. In a moment the door would have been shut again, and the

apparition vanished; but Dr. Stedman darted forward, caught him, and brought him in.

'No, no! Let me go back again. Never mind me, Will. I am used to be alone.'

And even when he was coaxed forward, and seated in his brother's own comfortable easy chair, he shrank and shivered like a person who has so long been out in the dark and cold that the light only dazzles him, and reviving warmth gives actual pain.

'Indeed I'll not intrude,' he said nervously to Edna. 'You are all so merry here. I can go up to my room again. I only came down because I was so restless—so restless! and I thought I should like to see you all.'

'And here we all are; and every one of us is delighted to see Uncle Julius,' said the mother, in her cheerfullest and most every-day tone. 'Boys, come here, and let me exhibit you to your uncle.'

Somewhat shyly, for they owned afterwards he was quite different to what they had expected —not at all their hero of romance, the ideal

'uncle from India'—the lads came forward, one by one. He shook hands with them, timidly—as afraid of them as they of him; and tried, with a great effort, to distinguish their ages, and learn to call them by their right Christian names. But his mind seemed feeble and confused, and very soon his interest in them flagged, his eyes grew dull and heavy, and he looked piteously at his brother, as if for protection against this new, old, dreadful world.

'It is all so strange, Will; I can't understand it.'

'Don't try to understand it, dear old boy. Everything will come right presently. Sit still here, and we will go on just as if you were not present. You will get accustomed to us soon.'

'Shall I? But no matter; it's not for long—I hope not for long.' And then, as if struck by a sudden apprehension, he called his brother back, and whispered hurriedly, 'What do they know about me—all these lads? Are you not afraid to bring me among your sons?'

Will smiled.

'I might harm them, you know. At any rate they will be ashamed of me, and so will you. Do you remember'—half his talk now consisted of his pathetic 'do you remember'—'that picture I sat for, "In another man's garden?" you laughed at it then; but it has all come true. The poor vagabond, looking on at his brother's happiness: it's just like me now; isn't it, Edna? Nay, I beg your pardon, my good little sister. I did not see you were crying.' He held out his hand and pressed hers tenderly.

'Behave better, then, brother Julius, or I'll not be good to you any more. And talking of pictures, I think you will not be the only artist in the family. Will, my son, come over here, and show your drawings to your uncle.'

This was a grand stroke of policy on Edna's part. Julius roused himself, like a dying war-horse at the sound of the trumpet, and examined keenly, first the sketches, and then the face of his young nephew, so curiously like his own.

'Sixteen are you, my boy? I was sixteen once, and people called me clever, and said I

should make a great painter some day. But they were mistaken, you see. Ah me!'

He leant back with a groan; and that sharp agony, perhaps the sharpest next to actual guilt that any man can know, the remorse over a wasted life, came over him heavy and sore.

Edna was sending her son away; but the next moment, in one of his strange, fitful fluctuations, Julius looked up.

'Don't disappoint the boy, if, as you said, he wants me to look over his drawings. Give me them again.'

They were very good for so young a draughtsman, and well chosen, being chiefly copied from the grand old Elgin marbles. As he turned them over, the eyes of the sick man began to glow.

'Ah! this is well done, and this—all, except the arm. But that bit of foreshortening is difficult. I remember how it bothered me when I drew it at the Academy. It was my best drawing, though; but I think yours is better still.'

And he regarded, with his observant artist-eye, but also with a sad, half-tender interest, the

little fellow, who, his face hot with happy blushes, knelt at his side; then put his hand on his nephew's shoulder.

'Anything more to show me, my boy? Anything of your very own?'

Shyly enough, young Will drew from the very bottom of his portfolio a page of heads, which when his mother saw she wished had been at the bottom of the sea. But it was too late.

Uncle Julius started. 'What is this?'

'It is Aunt Letty. I try to draw her over and over again from memory; but I can't succeed. She has the loveliest face in all the world,' added the boy, growing quite excited. 'Did you ever see her?'

Edna's heart almost stopped beating.

'Yes, I have seen her.'

'And do you think that you could draw her? From memory? You might. No one who had once seen Aunt Letty could ever forget her.'

'No.'

With a calmness that almost startled Edna—only she had ceased to be surprised at anything

now—Julius took up a crayon, and eyed it tenderly as he did so.

'I don't know if I can use this. It is years since I have touched a pencil—years!'

'Please try,' entreated Will, creeping up to his uncle, as if he had an especial property in him. Truly, if the younger generations sometimes 'push us from our stools,' they have likewise a wonderful power of soothing, and can often heal over the past, which they in their innocence annul and ignore.

The five boys all crowded round, watching, with different degrees of curiosity, the beautiful face growing under Uncle Julius's hand, which, in the eagerness of its long-forsaken labour, gradually became firm and bold. It seemed as if the artist's pure delight in work for work's sake were faintly dawning in him again. When the sketch was done, he held it at arm's length, critically yet tenderly. It was Aunt Letty—feature by feature, as the boys at once exclaimed. Only, not Aunt Letty as she looked now. It was the face, young and fresh and sweet, of lovely Letty Kenderdine.

'Yes; that will do, I think,' said Uncle Julius, holding it at arm's length, and looking at it. 'As you say, my boy, it is the most beautiful face in all the world—but only a face. I have drawn it many times: now, I shall never draw it any more. Put it away.'

Will obeyed, but shortly afterwards came and settled himself beside his uncle, to whom from that hour he attached himself with a devotedness that nothing ever altered, though it was long before it was either noticed or returned.

Yet, until the children went to bed, Uncle Julius roused himself from time to time out of his drowsy weakness and sad preoccupation, to observe them a little, with a half-inquisitive, half-melancholy curiosity, as if trying to fathom the mystery of these young lives, which had been growing up, as it were, on the ruins of his own, and to trace in the new faces glimpses of the old familiar ones—now fading, fast fading, as we all do fade.

'Five sons! five hostages to fortune, as

people say. Will, your name is not likely to cease out of the earth.'

'Our name, Julius,' said Will, tenderly.

'Fine fellows they are, and, I dare say, you and their mother are very proud of them; but I thought—somebody must have told me, only my memory is so bad now—there was a little girl too. Edna, I should have liked so much a little girl of yours.'

William touched his brother on the arm to enjoin silence, and glanced uneasily at his wife. But Edna had heard.

'Yes,' she said, speaking in a low voice, but quite calmly,—'yes, I had a little girl once, but God took her. I have learned now to be happy in my boys.'

Julius looked intently at his sister-in-law, as she sat there, wife and mother, fulfilling all her duties, and rejoicing in all her joys; and saw something in her face which he had never noticed before, which showed that she, too, had known sorrow, and been taught the hard lesson that we all have

to learn soon or late, in one form or other—to be content, not only with what is given, but with what is taken away. And the solitary, broken-down man, who had suffered so much, but whose suffering was always in and for himself, recognised, probably for the first time in his life, but with a force the effect of which was never afterwards obliterated, that there might be griefs of which he knew nothing, and in which he had never attempted to sympathize, yet which were in reality as sharp as, or sharper than, his own.

CHAPTER XXXI.

Conclusion.

It might have been best, according to poetical justice, and certainly as to tragical effect, that Julius Stedman should die—die in the odour of sanctity and the arms of his brother and sister, leaving to them a perpetual regret, and to his faithless Letty a perpetual punishment. But Heaven's justice is not always 'poetical,' and Heaven's mercy is above all. Sometimes—most often—it is shown in that blessed death which alone can retrieve all things, give to the wanderer home and the weary rest; but in this present case it was not so.

Julius did not die. In spite of his own prog-

nostications and his brother's still more serious fears, he began to amend; very slowly at first, with many retrogressions, still it was an amendment. The most fatal element of destruction in his career, his opium-eating, had not, happily, been of sufficiently long standing to be incurable, and after his illness he conceived a horror of it, and never touched it more. Nevertheless, his constitution was so shaken that, in all human probability, nothing except his brother's great medical skill, in addition to constant watching, could have saved him; but he was saved. At least he was gradually brought into a state of convalescence—a sort of moonlight existence, compared to the full day of health and strength—yet calm and quiet enough, so as to make his life bearable to himself, and, by-and-bye, no very great burden upon other people—a condition which would have been to him ten times worse than death.

Whether he will have a long life is doubtful. Probably not; for, at best, his was a temperament in which the sword early wears out the

scabbard. By fifty Julius Stedman will be quite an old man; as, indeed, he often looks now. But the value of life consists not in its length; and his is now as full as it used to be empty.

He still lives, nominally, in his brother's house, though he is frequently absent from it, for he hates London, and enjoys, with all his heart, the little cottage at Sevenoaks, which, though silently given up for one summer—Julius never learnt why—was taken the next, bought by Dr. Stedman, and presented formally to his wife, to be a perpetual delight unto her and all the family.

There, in the deep peace of country life, Julius spends his days, mostly all the year round, keeping house in the absence of his brother and sister; and painting a good deal, though not at his former large subjects. Like many other people, as he grew older, he grew much simpler in his tastes—humbler, too, and doubtful of his own powers; so that he contents himself with sitting at the feet of gentle Mother Nature, and reproducing her in lovely little 'bits,' which people call pre-Raffaelite—pictures which, unpretending as they

are, have such a reality, and often such a deep pathos about them, that they are always admired, and, moreover, sold—a circumstance of no slight importance to the artist, since as long as a fragment of health and life remained in him, Julius would have been far too honest and honourable to subsist upon another man's bounty, even though that man were his own brother.

As it is, he earns quite enough money to maintain himself in the moderate way, which is all he cares for now, for his ambition has long died out, and his extremely precarious health will always prevent his working as hard as those must work who would attain eminence in anything. He himself will never become a great artist—he knows that—but he is bent upon making one of his nephew Will.

There are few things more touching, and at the same time more ennobling, than the intense devotion of a young man to an elder one; and Will is devoted heart and soul to a passionate extent—which his father and mother, though not a bit jealous, are sometimes half frightened at—

to his uncle Julius. The two are constantly together, and have been, ever since Dr. Stedman, for both their sakes, and at their earnest entreaty, allowed his son to begin, regularly and decisively, the career of an artist. So Uncle Julius and his nephew are sworn companions, delighting in one another's society, and bound together by a tie as close as that of brothers, and as reverently tender as that between father and son. In his great love for the boy, and his eager anticipations of Will's future, Julius Stedman has a life neither forlorn nor unhappy, for he has learned to place his happiness on something out of himself—to help to win for another the fame that can never be his own. When he looks at young Will, and hears him praised on every hand, he feels that his own name will not be quite blotted out, nor his memory forgotten upon earth, even though he should die an old bachelor, wifeless and childless.

He has never again seen Mrs. Vanderdecken. She lives still at Holywell Hall, in great honour and undiminished wealth, flourishing like a green bay-tree; except that—poor woman!—she can-

not fairly be likened to 'the wicked.' She is not wicked, only weak. Her little daughter loves her dearly, and has unlimited influence over her; so that Gertrude has no difficulty in obtaining leave to visit Aunt Edna whenever she chooses—at whose house, of course, she meets Uncle Julius, in whom she was quick enough at once to recognise her friend Mr. Stone. But Gertrude has tact and delicacy enough not to take notice of this, except confidentially to her Aunt Edna. Nor does Julius Stedman take much notice of her: but Julius the younger does, showing as fatal a predilection for her sweet little plain face, so loving and sensible, kind and true, as his uncle did for her mother's. This new little romance may, alas! cause mischief some time, for Dr. and Mrs. Stedman dislike the idea of cousins marrying: still, they will never imagine themselves wiser than Providence, but if any serious attachment should occur, will leave their children's choice in their own hands.

Mrs. Vanderdecken herself never comes to visit her sister. That sad cowardliness, that

weak shrinking from all things difficult or painful, which had been the bane of her life—nay, of more lives than her own—haunts her still. Yet poor Letty has her good points, growing better as she grows older, through the influence of her child. She is always ready to do a kindness that does not give her very much trouble; and she is not a bad wife to her disagreeable old husband, who leads her anything but an easy life. There is many a small skeleton hid in the cupboard at Holywell Hall, but outside her home she enjoys a good deal both of pleasantness and popularity, being a very important person in her neighbourhood, where everybody agrees that Mrs. Vanderdecken is not only the handsomest, but the most charming, of middle-aged women.

Everybody does not say that of her sister, by any means; for Mrs. Stedman is one of those women who live so entirely within their own family that beyond it they are little known, and not half appreciated. But those who really do know her, love her; and those who know her best, love her most of all.

She and her husband are still in the prime of life, or at least only beginning to descend the brow of the hill which their children are climbing so fast. All good children—diligent, upright, affectionate, honourable: no 'black sheep' has yet been found in that happy little flock, out of which the only one lost is the little one—not lost, but gone before. Very few families can say as much; but then very few are blessed with such parents as William and Edna.

They have, to all appearance, half their life's work, and enjoyment too, still before them,—but who can tell? However, they have learnt not to be afraid of evil tidings; for their hearts stand fast, trusting in one another, and in the Lord. Only sometimes when they feel—this husband and wife—how very close they have grown together, and how impossible it is even to conceive the idea of being apart, a vague dread comes over them, followed by an unspoken prayer.

Such an one was in Edna's eyes, at breakfast one morning, when she looked up at her husband,

and silently pointed out an obituary notice in *The Times*:—

'Died, Isaac Marchmont, Esq., Merchant, aged 84; and, two days afterwards, aged 80, Elizabeth Lilias, his wife.'

'What is that?' asked Uncle Julius; and they passed round the newspaper to him without a word.

'One can hardly be sorry,' said Edna at last. 'They had such a long life together, and, except for the loss of dear Lily, it was a very happy life. I used sometimes to fancy, almost as happy as our own. And this,' she added softly, as her hand sought her husband's, 'this—their dying within two days of one another—seems to me the happiest lot of all.'

'I think so too,' said William Stedman.

Julius turned, and suddenly regarded his brother and sister with those wonderful dar eyes of his—very quiet eyes now, for the fire of passion had all burnt out of them—a little sad at times, though not painfully so,—but right

with a strange, far-away look, such as those have to whom life has been such sharp suffering, that even in their most restful seasons the other world seems sweeter and nearer than this one. He seemed to understand what they were talking about—he understood so many things now—griefs which he himself had never known, and joys in which he could never more have any part.

'Will and Edna,' whispered he affectionately, 'I think I guess what you mean. You would like to "go to heaven," as the child said, together; I go alone. But we shall all meet there. I believe that now. May God give you your hearts' desire!'

He rose, and leaning a moment on Will's shoulder as he passed him, kissed Edna, and went away upstairs to his own peaceful, solitary room.

THE END.

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